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Emotional Intelligence and Organizational Learning at Trade Shows

Purpose: This paper illustrates the interface between emotional intelligence, trust and organizational learning in the context of a trade show environment.

Design/methodology/approach: Theoretical underpinnings of this conceptual study include Appraisal Theory of Emotions. Propositions are presented that suggest positive relationships between antecedent variables, emotional intelligence and trust, contrasted with the dependent variable, organizational learning.

Findings: Organizational learning is generally considered to be a benign activity, created by the acquisition and dissemination of new information. The outcome of organizational learning is the development of new knowledge that ultimately results in a shared interpretation among members of the organization. This paper suggests that a lack of emotional intelligence, defined as “the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others” (Mayer, et al., 2000, p. 396), casts doubt on the motives of newly acquired information. Consequently, low levels of emotional intelligence can inhibit the acceptance of new information, leading to a reduction of learning by the organization.

Originality/value: This paper extends the concept of organizational learning by incorporating emotional intelligence and trust as antecedents of organizational learning. Previous research suggests a direct relationship between information acquisition, dissemination and organizational learning. This study implies that other factors can intervene after information is acquired, thereby affecting whether or not newly acquired information is fully incorporated into the organizational learning process.

Keywords

Organizational learning, emotional intelligence, trust, trade shows

Article Classification

Conceptual Paper

Emotional Intelligence and Organizational Learning at Trade Shows

Introduction

In order to innovate and stay on top of the competition, all organizations must make learning a priority. Understanding new industry developments, product innovations, changes in customer needs and competitive threats represent some of the issues that should rank high among organizational learning requirements. Even in situations with minimal competition, continuous learning is necessary for an organization to thrive and survive.

Organizational learning is defined as "...a method of successfully dealing with continuous change," (Jordan 2005, p 456); the development of insights based on new knowledge that has the potential to influence behavior (Slater and Narver, 1995); and organizational change processes (Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2004). Organizational learning can take place internally; for example, in departmental meetings, weekly sales updates and quarterly training sessions. Organizational learning can also take place externally. Peters et al. (2010) argue that collaboration with those outside of the organization contributes to a knowledge network that leads to organizational learning which can be used to serve the customer. Examples of external learning opportunities occur in conversations with vendors, reading new industry literature and attending conferences or trade shows

Trade shows are one of the most convenient and cost-effective methods for increasing and improving organizational learning. This is particularly relevant considering that trade

shows provide a unique vehicle aimed at acquiring new information and knowledge.

Organizations learn from customers, distributors, and other strategic partners at trade shows.

According to Slater and Narver (1995), the development of long term trusting relationships can ultimately evolve into “learning partnerships.”

Although organizational learning is often seen as a benign activity, trust is crucial in determining whether or not new information is seen as valid. According to their seminal article, Morgan and Hunt (1994) define trust as “...confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (p. 23). Trust is critical in relationships between buyers and sellers and “plays a crucial role in learning and in developing the knowledge integration capability” (Revilla and Knoppen, 2015, p. 1410). This paper argues that trust in the information source is a prerequisite for an organization to accept and incorporate new information. In the current business environment, information is often provided from anonymous or unverified sources, much of which can be of a questionable nature. For example, employee informants from within an organization will often only share information on the condition of anonymity or even the information written at the leading business papers tends to rely on anonymous sources. Scott-Ladd and Chan (2004) argue that there are inherent risks when it is presumed that all learning will be beneficial to the firm. Organizations who blindly accept information as true without a system of verification can open itself up to grave and unfortunate negative outcomes.

In addition to trust, this paper argues that the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) is also an antecedent to organizational learning. EI evaluates the ability of one to assume empathy for the other party by “putting oneself in the other’s shoes.” Scott-Ladd and Chan (2004) describe emotional intelligence as “...an individual’s ability to accurately perceive reality so as to understand and regulate their own emotional responses as well as adapt and respond to others” (p. 96). By exhibiting high emotional intelligence, the buyers and sellers often become more accommodating and less fearful.

Consequently, the following research questions are addressed in this paper: 1) Is organizational learning impacted by emotional intelligence? 2) Does trust enable higher organizational learning?

The next section discusses theoretical foundations that support the constructs analyzed in this manuscript.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the appraisal theory of emotions framework. Appraisal theory of emotions incorporates both primary and secondary appraisal, based on the interpretation of environmental threats (McFarland, Rode and Shervani 2016). It embodies the concept of emotional intelligence, represented by two levels of appraisal. The first is primary appraisal, which determines whether an event or activity threatens one’s well-being. Secondary appraisal assesses the ability to cope with perceived threats. Historically, appraisal theory was posited to

account for the differences in emotional reactions to the same event, amongst different individuals in different situations (Moors, et. al., 2013). More recent developments in appraisal theory include a recognition of the complexity in emotional events. This complexity requires the type of emotional regulation provided in high emotional intelligence (Moors, et al., 2013). This suggests the important connection between emotional intelligence and appraisal theory. Emotional intelligence is also associated with transformational leadership, which is shown to intensify employee trust in leadership (Barling, Slater and Kelloway, 2000).

Trust is widely accepted to be “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer, 1998, p. 395). During the primary appraisal process in the appraisal theory of emotions, the level of perceived threat to one's well-being is moderated by the level of trust in both the situation and the other participants. Trust increases as social distance decreases. Individuals are more trusting of those that they feel acquainted with and perceive to be socially comparable (Evans and Krueger, 2009). In the context of trade shows, repeat exposure and growing familiarity leads to an increase in trust. Trust is positively correlated with both the amount of time trade show participants have known each other and the number of contacts (friends) that they have in common (Glaeser, et. al., 2000).

The next sections provide a literature review of concepts studied in this research. These concepts include the following: Emotional intelligence (EI), trust, and organizational learning, all studied within the context of a trade show environment.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence was initially proposed as a way to link the concepts of human emotions and cognitive ability (Mestre, et al., 2016). At its core, the concept is a reflection of how individuals process emotions and the corresponding emotional information (Mestre, et al., 2016; Mayer et al., 2008). Previous literature suggests that the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) is derived from social intelligence (Johnson and Indvik, 1999). Scott-Ladd and Chan (2004) further extrapolate this definition by categorizing EI as a set of interrelated social skills comprised of knowledge, perception and regulation. Each of these social skills represent the degree to which emotional responses are managed (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). Mayer, et al. (2000) update this definition to define EI as “the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others” (Mayer, et al., 2000, p. 396). Although the construct of emotional intelligence has been associated with multiple interpersonal factors including relationship satisfaction, mental health and work performance and it has been studied in multiple disciplines i.e. psychology, medicine, business, it still has many critics (Schutte, et al, 2013).

There are those who question the meaningfulness of emotional intelligence. Is it really a necessary component of leadership (Antonakis, et al., 2009)? While others have concerns that despite the large amounts of literature being developed, there is a lack of translation of this research into practical data for managers to put that information into practice. Are there any proven strategies for assessment and training for emotional intelligence (Lopes, 2016)? Most detractors focus on the difficulty in accurately assessing the construct and the predictive validity of its various measures (Conte, 2005; Antonakis, et al., 2009). Despite these concerns, there has been development of practical approaches to EI in the workplace. Lopes (2016) suggests strategies to developing EI in conjunction with leadership. While Kadic-Maglajlic et al. (2016) offer strategies for developing EI into high sales performance. EI is recognized as an important and still developing business factor. Despite this recognized importance of EI, it is often seen as missing in the US workplace to the detriment of managers, employees and the organization itself (Johnson, and Indvik, 1999).

Goleman (2001) argues that effective relationship management depends on the level of emotional intelligence that is exhibited. This definition of emotional intelligence has four components: Self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy and emotional management. This closely aligns with the Mayer, et al. definition. Barling, Slater and Kelloway (2000) take a different view, suggesting that emotional intelligence is revealed by idealized influence, individual focus and inspirational motivation. This definition also provides a potential lens for the context of a trade show. Generally considered to be a milieu of excitement and anticipation

of new things to come, trade shows encourage an opportunity to get “caught up” in the spirit, potentially inspiring motivation that can impact emotional intelligence.

For this paper, we will base our definition on the four branch model of emotional intelligence which is referenced in several of the preceding conceptualizations. Mayer and Salovey (1997) posit that emotional intelligence has four sets of abilities: (1) perceiving emotion; (2) using emotion to facilitate thought; (3) understanding emotion; and (4) managing emotion. The ability to appropriately process this emotional information will directly affect our levels of trust (Christie, et. al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). Our working definition of emotional intelligence is defined as “the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others” (Mayer, et al., 2000, p. 396).

In the context of trade shows, emotional intelligence first measures an individual’s ability to identify and acknowledge their own emotions and the emotions of those that they are interacting with at the trade show. This is *perceiving emotions* (Christie, et al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). As trade show participants network throughout the event, it is important for them be able to identify their own emotional state, as well as the emotional state of others. This ability to discriminate between emotions will facilitate their ability to initiate and build relationships in order to encourage the exchange of information, and thus organizational learning.

Using emotion to facilitate thought refers to the ability of emotion to influence our priority of thought, memory and even problem-solving approach (Christie, et al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). A mood, although transient in nature, can influence our cognitive process.

The third ability in emotional intelligence is the *understanding of emotion* (Christie, et al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). In other words, it is the ability to analyze what an emotion means and how it influences the interaction with others. It includes the ability to show empathy for the other party and their feelings. For instance, when the seller realizes that the buyer can not appreciate the new product innovations because of a lack of exposure, then the seller will approach the buyer in a more consultative role as opposed to a strong sales approach.

Managing emotions is an individual's ability to detect emotions within themselves and others, both positive and negative, and assess the rationality of those emotions. It also includes the capacity to moderate emotion appropriately without detracting from the information being conveyed through the emotions (Christie, et al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). It gives a trade show participant the ability to interact with others in a highly emotional state in a way that acknowledges the source of the emotion without to respond in kind. For example, a participant can hear the complaints of an unhappy customer or the braggadocios statements of a direct competitor, and only glean the information provided in these exchanges rather than

feeling compelled to provide an equally emotional response. This ability to manage emotions keeps the focus on the end goal of organizational learning.

In this regard, there is support for the suggestion by Scott-Ladd and Chan (2004) that employees with high EI are more efficient at contributing to organizational learning. For example, high emotional intelligence often guides the seller to seek feedback from customers in order to find out potential concerns. Cherniss (2010) found that in situations of social interaction like trade shows, EI is likely to be more important. Also, according to Druskat and Wolff (2001), the regulation of emotions can build external relationships through the creation of opportunities for networking and interaction. Considering that emotions play a critical role in initiating, developing and maintaining long-term relationships (Anderson and Kumar, 2006), this paper argues that emotional intelligence should be analyzed as a potential antecedent to organizational learning at trade shows.

Proposition₁: Emotional intelligence is *positively related* to organizational learning

Trust

Morgan and Hunt (1994) refer to trust as "...confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity..." (p. 23). It is a dyadic construct in which an individual's perceptions and actions are influenced by the behaviors of others (Yakovleva, et. al., 2010). Credibility and benevolence are named as dimensions of trust by Doney and Cannon (1997), as well as

Ganesan (1994). Rodriguez, Perez, and Gutierrez (2007) agree with Geyskens, Steenkamp, and Kumar's (1999) interpretation of trust with honesty and benevolence as primary components.

Many articles that conceptualize trust refer to *benevolence*, the willingness to take risks when dealing with another party, and taking the chance to put oneself in a vulnerable position (Johnson-George and Swap, 1982; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Moorman, Deshpande and Zaltman, 1993). Or in other words, benevolence is "a belief that the other firm will treat the risking party well, under new business conditions" (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Aurifeille and Medlin, 2009, p.10). Aurifeille and Medlin (2009) posit that benevolence is critical to business relationship performance. Trust develops over time, as customer-supplier dyads learn what to expect of one another based on previous, multiple interactions. Trusting relationships can also develop among trade show customer-supplier dyads based on recommendations from other associates with whom these network members have strong, positive relationships. In either case, benevolence is a series of continuous actions within the multiple interactions, which lay the foundation for a strong business relationship (Aurifeille and Medlin, 2009).

This is particularly the case when these relationships are new, or in the early stages, where customers and suppliers are still trying to "figure each other out." New information can be more quickly confirmed as there are many sources with whom to validate (or invalidate) this information. Young concludes that Consequently, there will be changes in the way trade show customers and suppliers interact, based on this updated/revised information. As their

interactions increase, and thus their positive exchanges of information, so will their familiarity and comfort with one another. Even though competitors are prevalent at some level in virtually all trade shows, this is often outweighed by the fact that competitors are meeting on a neutral turf, thereby minimizing much overt negative behavior (Evers and Knight, 2008). Furthermore, the overwhelming reason that the majority of trade show participants attend is because they are interested in developing positive and mutually beneficial relationships (Reychav, 2009).

Credibility within the trust construct is presented as a belief that the other participant in a developing relationship has the expertise and ability to perform (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987; Aurifeille and Medlin, 2009). As trade show customers and suppliers interact at different trade show events, or at the same trade show event over a period of time, they learn more about each other's skills, reliability, and benevolence. This is a part of the organizational learning process. Over time, trade show customers and suppliers determine which organizations have the highest skill levels, can be depended on, and trusted; alternatively, they determine which ones are less likely to "hold their word." Consequently, less reliable firms are weeded out. Ultimately, by developing and enhancing trusting relationships with other companies, greater opportunities for organizational learning can be realized.

When trust between the customer-supplier dyad is high, then there is a strong likelihood that interactions will become more open and mutually beneficial decisions are made, leading to a complete overhaul of their relationship. Further, openness based on trust results

in high information-sharing, which in turn provides the opportunity for greater organizational learning to take place.

Proposition₂: Trust is *positively related* to organizational learning

Organizational Learning

The terms trade show, trade fair, exposition, conference, and exhibition are often used interchangeably (Bonoma, 1983; Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo, 1997). These meetings represent short term events, typically less than a week in duration, that take place on a regularly scheduled basis, enabling various members of a certain market or industry to meet face-to-face and share ideas, new product innovations, technical updates, industry information, connect with customers and prospects, as well as, in some cases, consummate sales (Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo, 1997; Smith, Gopalakrishna and Smith, 2004; Li 2008).

On the surface, trade show relationships may be viewed as transient in nature; however, there is usually a historical perspective to the relationships among various trade show participants (Godar and O'Connor, 2001; Li, 2006). Consequently, the short term nature of the trade show event often belies the long term relationships that begin, or are strengthened as a result of consistent trade show attendance.

All of the information that is acquired and disseminated at trade shows provides fertile ground for organizational learning. The organizational learning concept, which started in the

management literature (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Hedberg, 1981; Fiol and Lyles, 1985), was introduced to marketing by Sinkula (1994), then Slater and Narver (1995). Sinkula (1994) defines organizational learning as “the means by which knowledge is preserved so that it can be used by individuals other than its progenitor” (p. 3). Sinkula (1994) further refines the organizational learning definition as the process of information acquisition, dissemination, and development of a shared interpretation, which eventually becomes embedded into organizational memory. According to Slater and Narver (1995), organizational learning is described as “...the development of new knowledge or insights that have the potential to influence behavior” (p. 63); and by Shrivastava (1983) as “...an organizational process...(that) involves sharing of knowledge, beliefs, or assumptions among individuals” (pp. 16-17). Hunt and Lambe (2000) suggest that organizational learning is “the process of gaining knowledge or insights that can potentially influence the behavior of an organization” (p. 26). Jordan (2005) looks at organizational learning from the viewpoint of personal mastery, mental models, system thinking, team meaning and a shared vision. This study utilizes the Sinkula (1994) definition of organizational learning, i.e., the process of information acquisition, dissemination and development of a shared interpretation. Schilling and Kluge (2009) add to the literature by synthesizing the barriers to organizational learning and showing how they overlap within the processes of intuiting, interpretation, integration and institutionalization of the organizational learning.

The information acquisition phase of organizational learning at trade shows can occur during informal hallway conversations, product demonstrations, technical workshops, or by reading company brochures (Bettis-Outland, et al., 2010). In some situations, the trade show participant actively seeks out new information; but in other situations, the participant may not realize that new information exists, and in this case, would be less aggressive in the pursuit of new information. In addition, belief in the quality of the information source impacts the intensity of information search (Gelle and Karhu, 2003). In their paper on information seeking and learning in networks, Borgatti and Cross (2003) contend that "...information seeking is a function of (1) the extent to which a person knows and values the expertise of another, (2) the accessibility of this person, and (3) the potential costs incurred in seeking information..." (p. 434).

Primary reasons organizations attend trade shows are, from a customer standpoint, to acquire information regarding the status of the industry, place orders, or to obtain regulatory, competitive and supplier information that will impact the organization. From a seller's viewpoint, trade shows enable the opportunity to distribute information regarding new products and services, meet with current and potential customers, find out new industry trends, and survey the competitive landscape.

An example of how trade show networks enable organizational learning is when exhibitors, visitors and suppliers meet to discuss the latest technical innovations, new industry

trends, and updated customer requirements; by sharing this new information, the behaviors of trade show network members may be altered. It is likely that EI plays a role in these behavioral changes as evidenced by the openness in which information is shared. For example, if newly acquired information suggests that a popular computer operating system will be replaced by an updated, greatly enhanced version in the coming months, it is likely to influence the decision process of a trade attendee that plans to expand their international technical support center in the near term. This new information is then incorporated into the organization's learning process.

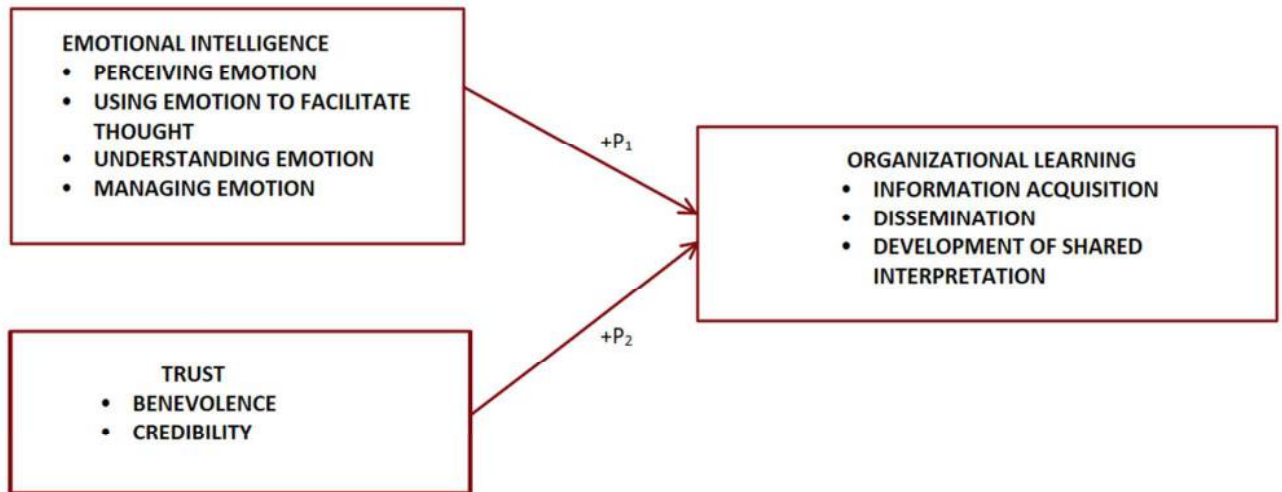
Members of the trade show network include industry executives, analysts, manufacturers, consultants, suppliers, purchase influencers, competitors, trade show organizers, regulators, strategic partners, and industry association members (Rosson and Seringhaus, 1995; Evers and Knight, 2008). With so many players interacting in such a compressed time period, trade shows assume an important role as a hub for initiating and reinforcing relationships by facilitating and encouraging high levels of information sharing (Reychav, 2009; Bettis-Outland, et al., 2010; Evers and Knight, 2008).

Dissemination, or sharing of trade show information, can occur as a one-way or two-way process. An example of one-way information dissemination is when a company CEO makes new product announcements to an audience in the main exhibit hall. An example of two-way information dissemination is when groups of trade show participants get together for a meal

and compare notes compiled from conversations with various vendors. Information dissemination among multiple parties lead to effective information-sharing, which increases the value of information as all parties provide comments and feedback, further clarifying the information (Glazer, 1991).

The development of a shared interpretation represents the final stage of organizational learning. Shared interpretation promotes organizational learning by drawing consensus in meaning of this newly acquired and disseminated information (Slater and Narver, 1995). However, just because information is disseminated, does not mean that the interpretation of this information will be shared across all network members. There could be intervening factors that affect the organization's ability to learn, or, diminish the learning capability of the firm. particularly as it relates to the development of a shared interpretation. According to Schilling and Kluge (2009), these intervening factors include politics, technology, strategy and formal organizational regulations. Additional barriers to organizational learning could be the organizational environment (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Hannan and Freeman, 1986); and organizational culture (Duncan, 1979).

Figure 1: Organizational Learning Antecedents



Managerial Implications

This model addresses the impact of emotional intelligence and trust on organizational learning in the context of trade shows. The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) is a precursor to organizational learning. Emotional intelligence is pivotal to the organizational learning process because high levels of EI are needed to build successful long-term relationships both within an organizational team and with other trade show participants. In our definition of emotional intelligence, there are four abilities, which regulate our level of emotional intelligence: (1) perceiving emotion; (2) using emotion to facilitate thought; (3) understanding emotion; and (4) managing emotion (Christie, et. al., 2015; Mayer and Salovey, 1997). Trade show participants that recognize and understand both their emotions, as well as the emotions

of others will have a better opportunity to make lasting connections with other participants. This includes the ability to process, understand and control our emotions in varying trade show situations, including those that illicit higher levels of emotional response. These high emotional situations can vary from excitement over increased sales to confrontation with competitors. Participants who manage their emotional experiences can use their connections with others to create opportunities for organizational learning. Managers should encourage activities and opportunities that will enhance individual emotional intelligence skills that can be utilized in the trade show environment.

The trade show learning experience is highly dependent upon the interaction with trade show participants. High levels of both individual EI combined with high levels of team EI assist in the successful establishment and maintenance relationships over time. For instance, on an individual level, emotional management is important to the process of building relationships. Emotional intelligence within a team environment leads to the development of the team norms needed to build external relationships through the creation of opportunities for networking and interaction. Success is more likely when individual EI is combined with team EI. Teams that have individuals with high levels of emotional intelligence are better able to establish “win-win” relationships that solidify over time (Barczak, et al., 2010). When developing teams for trade shows, managers should consider both individual EI for each participant and team EI.

Trust in an information source is a prerequisite for an organization to accept and incorporate new information. Trust is an important predecessor to the organizational learning process. High levels of trust between team members within the same organization encourages the team to function smoothly and work together to achieve objectives, ultimately contributing to higher learning taking place within the organization (Barczak, et. al., 2010; Wicks, et al., 1999). In the context of a trade show, it is important for each individual team member to have enough trust in the other team members and the organization to illicit buy in to clearly established and mutually understood objectives. In the trade show environment team objectives range from introduction of new product to acquisition of competitive information. The higher the trust between organizational team members the more effectively they work together.

As team members function together smoothly, they are better able to assess the credibility and benevolence of other participants. In other words, they assess if other team members can be believed and do they have the honorable intentions in their interactions. The higher the level of trust in other participants, the greater the opportunity to enable organizational learning through the development of relationships. Whether the motivation to attend a trade show is to establish new relationships, solidify current relationships or a combination of the two, trust is central. Until this is established and grown, and information sharing based on trust and credibility occurs, the process of organizational learning is stymied. Managers need to be clear about their objectives during trade show participation and attempt

to establish the type of “trusting” relationships, within teams and with other participants, that will assist in these objectives.

Emotional intelligence along with trust are antecedents of organizational learning. Together, both EI and trust create an environment where information sharing can flourish. When EI and trust are at high levels, organizational learning is also high. Consequently, organizational learning extends beyond the mere acquisition and dissemination of information, but evolves into the final stages of organizational learning, the development of shared interpretation. For an organization, this means that their understanding of learned information corroborates with others in the industry.

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