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Dear Reader,

We live in a VUCA environment. That is the name that the US Army Defense College gave to describe environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Increasingly employees find themselves facing non-routine problems and challenges that require new responses, new thinking and learning.

Are you part of a learning organization? In this month's issue we explore the meaning, challenges and practices of learning organizations. Our guest is Jonelle Rodericks, OD specialist and Global Change Management Consultant at Hoffmann-La Roche, New Jersey, USA.

We launch with this issue a new space for our readers to share their best practices. So if you consider you have an interesting story or expertise to share with the LIM News audience, send us an email ([newsletter@LIMglobal.net](mailto:newsletter@LIMglobal.net)) for an interview. Talking about learning organizations and communities, it couldn't be a more appropriate time to launch this initiative, don't you think?

Enjoy the reading and contact us to share your story.

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

***"Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous."***

*Confucius (551 BC - 479 BC)*

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# LIM NEWS



***20 YEARS developing your leaders while they develop your business***

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# LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

## An Interview with Jonelle Rodericks



*LIM News: The term "Learning Organization" has become popular. In your opinion, why do organizations need to learn?*

**JR:** In today's fast-paced, competitive world organizations need to learn from their past successes and mistakes, so that they can keep up with their competition and apply their learning to give them a stronger hold over the marketplace and over their customers.

*LIM News: And do they learn? Or do the individuals learn?*

**JR:** Yes, organizations do learn. There are often events/situations that get embedded in an organization's history that when recounted could constitute learning; however, the extent to which this organization actually "registers" this experience as learning is debatable.

On the other hand, it is easier to track when individuals learn. They learn new processes, sharpen their skills on things they already know, seek learning from peers, supervisors and outside training, or sign up for developmental experiences.

*LIM News: Can you give us an example of organizational learning?*

**JR:** In a company where I once worked, there was a very strong culture for learning, development and improvement both from the perspective of both the individual employee as well as the larger organizational system. They constructed the organizational learning in a systematic way, by having a group of people devoted to organizational development. Over time this centralized group had launched various organization-wide processes such as people and organizational development interventions in a consistent and aligned manner. During a senior executive-driven cost reduction effort, however - in order to reduce budget allocations - the VP of HR was asked to downsize this group, forcing the 12-strong group to be disbanded. Over the following six years this company delivered Organization Development that was once delivered in a centralized way in a decentralized manner. And then there was a realization at the very top that there ought to be a centralized group who delivered interventions related to change management and organization

development. So there's an example of how it took this company about six years to learn that a decentralized approach to delivering on change projects only meant higher consulting bills, inconsistent methodologies and little or no pull through of organizational learning.

***LIM News: What are the different techniques that organizations use to sharing learning?***

**JR:** Some companies spend large amounts of money on technology-based solutions that help them with their learning/knowledge sharing intentions. Others create databases with expert locator systems to enhance the sharing of knowledge from expert to expert. The system identifies keywords and connects individuals throughout the organization that seem to be using frequently those keywords, under the assumption that they may be interested in the topic. In that way, individuals get connected to each other. Still others focus more on the capture of learning at particular predetermined stages in a business process, and by doing this over time; they build a huge repository of valuable learning. For example, some pharmaceutical companies capture learning as a compound moves from stage to stage in the drug development process. At some companies there is little coordination around how the organization collects learning or learns, and they have more organic and informal ways of sharing, like boss-subordinate, peer-to-peer knowledge transfer. Much of the learning happens in the interactions between boss-subordinate, through tips, advice, coaching or feedback from a more expert person to a less experienced one. Learning from colleagues is also a very important source of learning, that happens quite informally in a variety of settings: at the water cooler, in meetings, task forces or over lunch. These types of exchanges are low-risk and, as a result, are sometimes richer.

***LIM News: How does an organization manage those perceived risks of showing that a person does not "know"?***

**JR:** The kind of knowledge sharing/learning modality that a company chooses largely depends on their culture and the values espoused by the senior leadership teams. You might be aware of the strong role that J&J's credo plays in their definition of who they are and what focus their business needs to have. Articulating this at high levels in organizational hierarchies often gives departments, functions, and individual employees a focus around which to set goals and objectives, which in turn determines what focus the organization places on learning and the sharing thereof.

***LIM News: So it depends on the culture?***

**JR:** An organization's culture has a huge role to play in how they choose to learn and incorporate feedback. I was once responsible for organizing quarterly employee engagement meetings between the CEO and 200 employees for a large pharmaceutical company. These events had very little to do with what the leadership had to report and was focused more on listening to employee concerns and feedback about various topics ranging from business strategy to HR issues. While action was not taken on all of the input received, this was a great way to get a pulse of the organization across functions and levels, and actually a great learning/feedback mechanism for leaders. As one can well imagine, this approach to learning/feedback would be less likely to be used by companies with more hierarchical/bureaucratic cultures.

***LIM News: What is the contribution in your opinion of the Chief Learning Officer (CLO), a relatively new role?***


**JR:** Some companies try to elevate the importance of learning by formalizing the role of the Chief

Learning Officer. While this certainly supports the visibility of learning to the organization, it does not always imply a higher level of commitment. Often a person in this role is responsible for creating and driving the people strategy and the processes and opportunities to learn and develop through the course of employees' careers. When the CLO is a member of the executive team, there is a huge opportunity to understand the business needs, contribute to the strategic direction providing the people perspective, which then makes the plans more applicable.

***LIM News: What do you see as the leadership role in promoting organizational learning?***

**JR:** The role of leaders cannot be underestimated in promoting the culture and values around creating a shared vision for organizational learning. Organizations where the top leadership is committed to creating an open door for communication and feedback for better performance, end up creating and supporting a culture where learning is valued and rewarded. At a company where I once worked, this was done via various mechanisms ranging from more formal ones like incorporating learning into a manager's goals, to less formal ways at open forums and speak-out sessions. This encouraged two way communication, and sent the message that people's voices are valued and will be considered. Of course, action needs to follow...

***LIM News: What advice do you have to OD/HR professionals who may want to work towards creating a learning organization?***

**JR:** OD professionals, who would like to create a learning organization, need to start their work at the top to find out whether the senior executive team will support the ideas and the resulting culture, as well as the activities that will support and reward behaviors in a learning organization. Without buy-in from the very top, it is hard to drive efforts too far down. 

***Jonelle Rodericks*** is the Global Change Management Consultant at Hoffman-La Roche Pharmaceutical, New Jersey, USA. She holds a Masters from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India and a MBA from Temple University, Philadelphia. She has 15 years of experience in cross-cultural OD interventions, strategic organizational design and Talent management. She can be reached at [jonelle98@hotmail.com](mailto:jonelle98@hotmail.com).

### INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING

"Informal learning can be supported by widespread access to Internet resources such as search engines, websites and blogs, as well as other forms of electronic information, but questions can be raised as to whether the organization's culture, rewards, structure and practices support learning as well as "getting the job done". In some ways technology has brought with it a new openness to informal learning because of the amount and types of information available . [...]. The role of workplace educators, in the face of these challenges, may be to pay as much attention to organizational supports and barriers to learning as they do to learning processes and strategies. Some organizations seek frameworks -e.g., Communities of Practice, social networks, virtual teams, knowledge or learning networks- and strategies that support informal and incidental learning.[...] IBM, for example, has recently moved to an On Demand Learning framework that retains some structured education (Work Apart Learning), but then relies even more heavily on informal learning catalyzed by work needs (Work Enabled Learning) and incidental learning in the moment to support performance (Work Embedded Learning). Mechanisms have been introduced that aid in such learning, such as After Action

Reviews and Quality tools that provide mechanisms for driving out error and for continuous learning."

*Source: Marsick, V.J., Watkins, K.E., Callahan, M.W., and Volpe, M. Informal and incidental learning in the workplace. Unpublished chapter.*



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