

Becoming a Learning Organization

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Many organizations aspiring to become learning organizations fail to establish a clear and shared picture of how to create and maintain the new entity. This lack of a compelling vision is the single biggest inhibitor to actualization. The absence of a clear rationale will doom the effort to develop the structure and processes critical to establishing the new organization

A most powerful rationale has been articulated by Arie De Geus of Royal Dutch Shell who several years ago ventured that "The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable advantage". Further, Watkins and Marsick's book, *Sculpting the Learning Organization*(*), provides rich insights into defining and building a learning organization, and posits that a learning organization is one that "learns continuously and transforms itself...Learning is a continuous, **strategically used process—integrated with and running parallel to work.**" (Boldface added). From this, one can make the following assumption: An organization that is good at learning should be good at earning and be able to compete and succeed both now and in the future.

Assuming this is valid here are **four related questions** worth addressing:

- *What goes on in an organization that is constantly learning?*
- *How is a learning organization created?*
- *What conditions are required for this to take place?*
- *So what are the implications and next steps?*

What goes on in an organization that is constantly learning?

Without a clear and shared picture of what the desired state really is, it is difficult to recognize a learning organization when we see one and even more difficult to build one. So let's try to describe a learning organization. What's going on?

In the ideal world senior leader/managers model the change they desire. The senior management team agrees upon a shared picture of their learning organization and outlines the key characteristics and behaviors. They identify and communicate the meaningful values that serve as the rudder for the organization. These values are measured behaviorally and are part of the performance management system. Senior managers must themselves model these behaviors and encourage and reward every team leader across the organization for doing the same. In addition, they require all leader/managers to undertake the following **three key initiatives**:

- 1) **All team leaders develop a clear contract with their team stating mutual expectations.** This set of agreements frees and empowers both the team and the leader to act because they have made explicit their needs and wants. This contract is revisited and revised periodically as a living benchmark for continual improvement as the team strives for high performance. In our experience this contracting phase is seldom done and the power of the team is never fully unleashed as a result. There is tremendous power in being explicit.
- 2) **Every team establishes a clear, actionable set of norms** that constitutes the framework for how they work together. These norms are easily converted into a 'high performing team instrument' by which a team periodically measures its own effectiveness, learns from the self-assessment, and makes the changes necessary for improved performance. Some tried and effective norms include:



▶ **100% responsibility** –all team members share 100% responsibility for the success of our team’s work; this means that if we don’t like what’s going on we recommend what we would like to see in a proactive, positive way; we do not complain;

▶ **“48 or forget”** – if something happens that gets us upset we speak up in a constructive way within 48 hours or we forget it; we don’t let hurt feelings and grievances pile up to obstruct progress;

▶ **simple, inclusive decision-making process** – we have, understand, agree upon and use a simple and inclusive decision-making process;

▶ **simple, inclusive planning process** – we have, understand, agree upon and use a simple and inclusive planning process;

▶ **efficient and effective meeting protocol** – we have, understand, agree upon and use a simple, efficient and effective meeting protocol;

▶ **personal learning goals** – we each establish, share, and ask for support in achieving, our personal learning goals for self-improvement;

▶ **feedback** – we regularly ask for and give one another appreciative and constructive feedback in a caring way;

▶ **reflection and dialogue** – we build time into our meetings for reflection and dialogue in order to hear and understand what each of us is thinking and feeling; we realize that everyone’s opinion and thoughts are important and need to be heard if we are to make the best decisions; without taking time to reflect, not only does the team lose the benefit of obtaining everyone’s thoughts and feelings, but also they omit the deliberate and critical effort to capture and internalize the learnings each has had in the work.

3) There is a planned and if possible, global process for collecting, managing and sharing information, resources, best practices and lessons learned.

If leaders model the corporate values and take these three initiatives the entire culture changes. Teamwork replaces individual competition as the norm, with greater transparency.. A spirit of curiosity, reflection, appreciation and interest in learning prevails, and mistakes are viewed as learning rather than reasons for punishment. There is little or no fear of speaking up and speaking out. As a result,

everyone’s ideas are considered and better plans emerge. Knowledge is retained and accessible; best practices are readily shared. Teams feel greater ownership and commitment for ‘their’ plans that ultimately lead to better results – continual savings, earnings and improvements. Morale increases. Turnover declines. This is a learning organization.

How is a learning organization created?

A step at a time, and based on planning, and input from all levels of management. First, someone in the organization needs to become a passionate advocate for creating a learning organization and to enroll senior management through influence (education and advocacy) that it simply **makes good business sense**. As Peter Senge writes, learning organizations are “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire” (*). Someone in top management, preferably the CEO and entire management team must champion the journey and lead the way. HR and OE professionals become the architects and engineers for the development and change that needs to take place leader by leader and team by team. This requires a systemic and integrated development plan that delivers the supports (training and coaching) to the change leaders across the company. A rapidly cascading strategy will have the best results.

In many organizations the vehicle for creating a learning organization is already in place. The Chief Learning Officer (CLO) and/or the HR VP and leadership team has this as part of their overarching vision and mandate to develop the key change leaders so that the new behaviors cascade throughout the organization – project by project, team by team systematically and almost simultaneously.

To help the desired changes in attitude and behavior to become rooted in the organization, there are two vital supports that must be in place. The first is a **development plan..** The second is that **the performance feedback and reward systems** are seen to support and institutionalize the new systems and behaviors.

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What conditions are required for this to take place?

What are the implications and next steps?

You will find the answers to these final questions in the full article, at <http://limglobal.net/ARLNewsletter0809.html>

