

ARL™ NEWS

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Are We a Learning Organization?

By Ernie Turner

As part of a program with a multinational corporation to develop their Human Resources Professionals to become “better business partners”, we recently had a very rich session, reflecting on, and having a dialogue on, the question:

“From the work we’ve been doing what are we learning about becoming a Learning Organization?”

In a very brief period all the participants in the room were able to sketch some key attributes of a learning organization from our different perspectives. Given the limited time our definition below is just a beginning, and they will continue to build on it. The fascinating part of this is that this is not an article written by an expert: this is the collective wisdom of a number of HR professionals that became “experts” in reflecting on their own experience, knowledge, and lessons, to come up with this wonderful description of a learning organization. This is not abstract theory: these are real experiences of that week, being debriefed and transformed into lessons.

I wanted to share it with our readers, as an inspiration and invitation to reflect on what you know about how to build a learning organization. The power will come not so much from reading what we said as it will be reflecting upon the question, adding to our thoughts and then trying these concepts out wherever you are.

I've taken the liberty of combining the thoughts, adding some related reflections that were produced in the group the next morning, and painting this poetic picture – our picture of an emerging 'learning organization', what any organization can aspire to be; and what, in several places, some organizations – like this one -are already.

Becoming a Learning Organization

Learning begins with awareness – turning a mirror upon ourselves
 And asking ourselves a number of questions
 It requires reflection which, in turn, inspires thoughts
 The foundation for learning and adapting

The 'amber light'
 Gives us the time we need
 To slow down

To discover where we are and where we want to be – should be
 For if we only operate in 'the green light' we will end up making good time
 Going fast – but sometimes in the wrong direction
 Without reflection we simply 'do'; we miss the richness of 'being'
 Both are important
 We are called human beings for good reason

Learning requires focusing on the 'question' instead of the 'answer'
 Taking time to find the right question
 Discovering that there is no one right answer
 There are many good answers

We realize that 'mistakes' are opportunities for learning
 And we learn the most when we risk the most
 When we take the time to learn from our 'mistakes' we become wiser
 We come to realize that the more we learn; the less we know
 Life is more complex than we once thought

We develop a 'white belt' mentality
 We are curious and passionate; we want to discover
 We appreciate what others see, feel and think
 We make time and take time to think, listen and to share experiences
 We discover that reflection doesn't take much time to reap big benefits
 Thinking is real work

We ask for help
 We offer support and coach one another
 We ask for feedback and receive it without defensiveness
 We offer feedback as a way to grow
 We accept feedback as a gift
 We forgive

We are more relaxed and calm
 We trust that others have good intentions
 As a result we are all more empowered to 'try out'
 To take 100% responsibility for our collective success
 To reduce ambiguity; to seek clarity; to establish a common shared picture
 To engage everyone in our organization, our teams, our families and
 ourselves

We are aware that systems, structures and simple, effective concepts and
 tools

Support good learning experiences
 We realize that an investment in learning is an investment in our business
 Our organization, our teams, our families and ourselves
 Without Learning there is no sustainable Earning
 They go together

We have been, in this program
 Functioning as a learning organization
 So let's continue
 Let's go out, model and multiply

Let's remember the words of Margaret Mead –
 Never underestimate the power of a few
 To make a big difference
 In fact, it seldom happens
 Any other way



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