

CCMD REPORT No.1

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

A CCMD REPORT



CANADIAN CENTRE
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CONTINUOUS LEARNING



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Continuous Learning

A CCMD Report

Canadian Centre for Management Development
May 1994

Canada

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Centre for Management Development*

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Preface

The report of the PS 2000 Task Force on Training and Development recommended that the public service develop a culture of “continuous learning.” In order to lay the groundwork for implementing this recommendation the Human Resources Development Council appointed a Steering Group on Continuous Learning. The original membership of the Steering Group included D.B. Dewar (Principal, CCMD) as Chair, John Edwards (PS 2000), Ivan Fellegi (Statistics Canada), Ole Ingstrup (Correctional Service of Canada), Lynne Pearson (Training and Development Canada), Ric Cameron (Treasury Board Secretariat). Following Bev Dewar’s retirement, he was succeeded by Ole Ingstrup both as Principal of CCMD and as Chair of the Steering Group on Continuous Learning.

Parallel to the Steering Group’s own discussions, it commissioned a report on Continuous Learning from CCMD. The report has been reviewed by the Steering Group and by the HRDC and endorsed for publication.

This report on Continuous Learning is intended to be the first in a series of CCMD Reports. These reports will outline CCMD’s view of current management topics or issues and offer practical guidance to managers.

In its present form the report on Continuous Learning is very much a working document. As the Report itself makes clear, this is a rapidly evolving field of enquiry and practice, and it would be foolhardy to attempt to capture it in any definitive way. As a result, this should be regarded as a report in progress, with many potential chapters to be added to it for future editions. Therefore readers’ comments both on the current text and on potential additions would be most welcome and are very much encouraged.

This report is also available in summary form.

Ole Ingstrup
Principal

Ralph Heintzman
Vice-Principal, Research

1. Introduction: On Learning

*".... nothing is really happening in the world
except the education of the people in it."*

Northrop Frye

*Learning is central
to life. As human
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Learning is central to life. As human beings we experience learning as a basic condition of existence and as a source of fulfilment and delight. In our daily lives we are engaged in a continuous process of exchange with the world that surrounds us. The skill and success with which we can absorb, understand and respond creatively to the messages we receive from the surrounding environment determine the level of excellence at which we lead our lives and the degree of satisfaction they afford us. A person who learns very little from daily contact with the world, or who has ceased to learn altogether, will find it an increasingly barren and difficult place in which to live, and one that yields little joy.

In recent years we have begun to be more aware that the same holds true for groups, organizations, and even societies. If they have not learned to learn — if they have not learned to pay attention to what the world is telling them and to act accordingly — or if they have forgotten how to do so, then they too are condemned to experience increasing difficulty, hardship and frustration.

At the level of society numerous examples spring readily to mind. The “environment” itself is a splendid example: because Western societies were slow to *learn* the lessons from the natural environment, many Western societies live with levels of pollution that represent a danger to human health and life, while global climatic change seems a real possibility. Similarly, because Western economies were slow to read the signals about the increasing competitiveness of the global economy or about the long-term consequences of public spending and debt, they find themselves at risk on both fronts.

The same lessons have been learned at the level of organizations: those that have been slow to learn and adapt have found themselves in increasing difficulty. The successful organizations appear increasingly to be those that have found a way to promote learning both at the individual level and at the level of the organization itself.

It has become commonplace in the rapidly swelling literature on this theme to emphasize the pace of change in the contemporary world and to attribute to it the growing emphasis on learning as a key to survival and adaptation. There is much truth in this. But the rapid pace of

change, though it increases the pressure on organizations, merely makes manifest what was already an indelible part of the human condition. We are learning beings, and learning is what is going on in the world.

One of the problems that arises as this truth becomes more widely recognized is that, as with many bandwagons, there is an inevitable temptation to reassemble all that is most current in management practice or theory under the learning banner. There is even more temptation to do this in the case of the “learning” vogue because the learning imperative is such a powerful current in life that it easily furnishes a brand new paradigm or prism from which to view almost everything that happens in the world, including the world of work. Under the influence of this temptation every recent management concept or innovation — from the well-performing organization, to Total Quality Management (TQM), empowerment, mission-driven organizations, alignment, leadership and much else besides — is heated up anew under the label of continuous learning.

The very power of the learning perspective makes this tendency understandable but it can lead to confusion, to a kind of management mush in which the same ingredients are regularly recycled under different names. This report accordingly resists the tendency to indiscriminate inclusion: it sticks as closely as possible to what we believe are the genuine insights and techniques to be gained from the theme of continuous learning.

Two points deserve to be made at the outset. The first is that in adopting a learning perspective we immediately distance ourselves from the point of view of teaching and training. Training is something that is done to you, or that you do for someone else. Learning is something you do to and for yourself. Training implies that something already known is to be transferred to someone else. Learning, by contrast, implies a process of self-directed exploration and discovery, in search of something not yet known, something yet to be found.

This first point of departure is actually in harmony with current trends within the training field itself. Training is rapidly evolving toward a new paradigm in which the accent is much less on externally devised and imposed “training” and much more on internally motivated learning related to the immediate needs of the workplace, either for individuals or for organizations. The report has more to say on this theme below.

The second point to be made is that the field of learning, especially continuous and organizational learning, is in its infancy. While there has

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Learning is something you do to and for yourself.

been a rash, almost an avalanche of recent reports and documents on these subjects, little of this literature is rigorous or discriminating. In the rush to say something about these matters, writers of reports have used almost any materials or themes lying to hand and the result is often the mush already described. We have, as we said, tried to resist this temptation, but the result is that this can only be an interim report, a work in progress. One of its conclusions is that the work should continue and that CCMD in particular should make the learning theme one of its research priorities over the coming years, supporting a variety of projects and events designed to deepen our understanding of learning within an organizational framework.

2. Individual Learning

Individual and organizational learning are distinct but not separate. Each is the condition for the other. Individual learning is the condition for organizational learning since only individuals have minds that can learn.

Individual learning is the foundation of continuous learning. It is not the whole story. In the next section of this report we go on to discuss the ways in which individual learning can and should blossom into organizational learning. Individual and organizational learning are distinct but not separate. Each is the condition for the other. Individual learning is the condition for organizational learning since only individuals have minds that can learn. But organizations shape and mould the individuals in them: they help them to learn or prevent them from doing so. Sometimes they help us to be better than we otherwise could or would be. Sometimes they force us to learn patterns or habits that do us no good, and that harm the organizations we belong to.

As the second part of this report points out, organizational learning has much to do with overcoming these negative patterns, and turning our places of work into the kinds of organizations that allow our better selves to emerge and flower, organizations that encourage us to be the persons we yearn to be. But organizational learning cannot occur except on the foundation of individual learning. Individual learning may be oriented, stimulated and aligned to encourage organizational learning. But everything begins with the individual.

This section of the report examines a few of the ways in which organizations can think about individual learning in order to provide the foundation for organizational learning. It may be helpful to think of individual learning in two distinct ways: the *formal* learning that takes place in courses and formal development programs; and the *informal* learning that takes place on the job and in the workplace (though we shall have to qualify this distinction as we go along). Many organizations confine their thinking to the formal learning processes, although there is increasing evidence that the great bulk of learning by managers comes from the workplace itself. For that reason the report puts some emphasis on the informal processes of learning, returning to the subject after the initial discussion of formal learning.

Formal development and "training" programs are important elements in the tool box of any organization that aspires to develop a culture and habit of continuous learning.

A. Formal Learning

Formal development and "training" programs are important elements in the tool box of any organization that aspires to develop a culture and habit of continuous learning. For this reason many organizations establish measures of the share of resources that are being devoted to the "training" budget, either as a proportion of the salary mass, as a per capita expenditure by employee, or some other measure. These are important indicators which allow an organization to compare itself to others. For example, in its efforts to promote organizational learning, Syncrude Canada Ltd. has committed itself to spend seven to ten percent of salary costs on individual learning. Another way to measure an organization's commitment to formal learning is by the amount of annual time set aside for training activities per employee. For example, at a time when it had 12,900 employees, IBM Canada was committed to providing an average of 13 days of training per employee every year.

By comparison with many private sector organizations, the resources devoted to training within the public service are quite modest. For instance, the Public Service Commission aims at \$400 per year per employee, and a major department aims at five days of training per year per employee. In a number of other departments, the levels are lower. In a time of austerity, it has been difficult for departments to maintain their allocations for training, let alone increase them. Despite this, there are some departments which have given high priority to training and which have reallocated the necessary resources. For example, Statistics Canada has recently gone from spending one percent of its budget on training to spending three percent.

In order to ensure that training funds are well spent, organizations have found it important to put in place procedures for assessing learning needs and for planning individual learning activities. In some cases, this process is linked to the annual appraisal system. In other cases, it is maintained as a distinct and separate activity. Whatever way it is handled, it is important that the organization ensure, at least on an annual basis, that employees have an opportunity to assess their learning to date and their current learning needs, and to develop a plan for future learning activities. This may even broaden into a "personal development plan," as suggested below. At Indian and Northern Affairs, for example, one full-time and one part-time employee help employees plot their own individual career paths over a one- to five-year period and to map out

Most formal development and training programs take place outside the individual's normal workplace, and often outside the organization itself.

complementary training plans. For some individuals an organization may wish to use an assessment centre methodology, or an external assessment consultant, to assess learning and development needs, and to help him or her develop a personal plan for future development. However, this approach can be relatively expensive and is usually reserved for the senior members of the organization.

Most formal development and training programs take place outside the individual's normal workplace, and often outside the organization itself. For this reason, the subject matter of courses or programs will not be directly related to the immediate problems of the workplace or, if it is, it will usually be in a generalized form applicable to a variety of organizations and circumstances. For example, a topic for examination is more likely to be a general one like "organizational effectiveness" than a specific one such as "What business are we in and what do we need to do it well?"

Such formal programs outside the workplace or organization have a number of advantages, of which we should not lose sight.

- External programs allow participants to meet persons from other organizations or other parts of the organization and thus to gain new insights and perspectives from the experience of others.
- They allow participants to step outside the assumptions and culture of their own organization and to develop new or alternative ideas and perspectives.
- Participants may feel freer to express themselves and less concerned that they are being observed or assessed.
- External programs may be in a better position to address the whole person, and to offer participants an internal voyage of discovery and reassessment it would be awkward to undertake in front of immediate work colleagues.
- External programs may be able to offer resource persons or experiences at a "higher" level or with a broader perspective.

For these reasons, formal development programs taking place outside the workplace will and should retain their place in the range of instruments available to an organization concerned to promote a learning culture. However, such programs also have some drawbacks that are the flip side of their strengths. Because they are necessarily more abstract and generalized, they may seem less practical and relevant to participants, who may find it difficult to relate the kind of information or

perspectives gained from such a course to their “real” working life, and may soon discard or forget them. Even where participants leave a program with firm intention to apply the lessons learned to their “home” organizations, they may return to find themselves isolated in an uncomprehending milieu untouched by their own recent experience, and may quickly revert to old ways and habits.

As a result, there is now a discernible trend to augment traditional learning programs in at least three ways. The first is to link even external programs as much as possible to the concrete challenges and problems of the workplace by inviting participants to bring such problems to the program and to share them with others as part of the subject matter of the learning experience. As a result of the growing desire to link even formal training programs to the current problems and challenges of the workplace, organizations are seeking more often to “customize” formal learning programs to reflect their own specific needs and circumstances. Sometimes organizations are joining together to form learning “consortia” in order to achieve the best of both internal and external programs: a consortium allows customization and a focus on real problems while providing for some of the “fresh air” and perspective that comes from mixing persons from different organizations.

In the Canadian public service, a number of departments have established in-house training institutes, where the training can be related both to the overall strategies of the department and to the everyday work requirements. For example, Transport Canada has long had its own training institute, and External Affairs has recently established a new Foreign Service Institute. For the public service as a whole, CCMD performs the function of gearing training to the overall priorities and strategies of the government, in support of reform initiatives and broad management objectives.

The most thoroughgoing of the approaches that make real, current business or management problems the subject matter of formal learning are the programs based on “action learning.” As this methodology is described later in this report (see section E in part 3 below) we will not review it in detail here except to say that it is based on an alternating rhythm between action and reflection on the action taken, reflection that occurs in company with other managers and with a resource person. An “action learning” program of this kind may extend over a period of months or even as much as a year or more. “Action learning” can take the form of an “external” program in which the participants are drawn from a number of organizations. Or, alternatively, all the participants

The most thoroughgoing of the approaches that make real, current business or management problems the subject matter of formal learning are the programs based on “action learning.”

may be drawn from one organization. In this case it becomes one of the principal modes of “organizational learning.”

The second of the three trends mentioned above is in fact the trend toward organizational learning. Precisely because the investment in individual learning may be wasted if the organization itself does not change to provide a hospitable milieu for learning and growth — because learning itself seems often to be more effective and permanent when it is closely related to the pressing needs and concrete problems of the workplace — many organizations are now building on the base of individual learning to promote learning by the organization as a whole. This is the subject of the second part of our report.

The third trend is a movement to emphasize the kind of informal individual learning that takes place on the job itself. To this subject we turn next. Before doing so, however, it should be noted that the growing attention given to the various modes of informal learning to be discussed below points to a significant new challenge for formal learning. If informal learning is important, then both learners and teachers (or learning facilitators) are going to have to know how to carry it out successfully. This points to a critical new role for “formal” learning: to develop the skills, techniques, knowledge and awareness necessary to develop informal learning and to deepen the learning element already present (but frequently overlooked or underexploited) in our normal working lives.

If informal learning is important, then both learners and teachers (or learning facilitators) are going to have to know how to carry it out successfully.

B. Informal Learning

Although in the past organizations have generally devoted much the greatest part of their development focus to *formal* learning programs, the bulk of research to date seems to show that most individual learning in organizations occurs elsewhere, in the *informal* processes of everyday work. Of the estimates that have been attempted, none we have seen places the proportion of learning that comes from formal training or education at more than 20 percent. In *The Lessons of Experience*, one of the most accomplished studies of executive learning and development, authors Morgan McCall, Michael Lombardo and Ann Morrison put the matter somewhat differently: "Only a minute part of a manager's time is spent in the classroom, suggesting that it's the other 99.9 percent of the time that the bulk of development takes place." When asked to identify the three most important sources of learning in their careers, 4 percent of male executives studied and 6 percent of women referred to formal learning experiences.

One of the key ways in which individuals develop is through appointment to new and challenging jobs, either in the form of promotion or in the form of job rotation or secondment.

In their elegant study, McCall, Lombardo and Morrison identify the most important "lessons of experience" that the executives they studied had learned in the course of a lifetime, and the key events or experiences through which they learned them: the "trial by fire" of major work assignments and challenges; the encounters with bosses, both good and bad; and the "hardships" of personal trauma, career setback, changing jobs, business mistakes, and problem employees. The lesson of their research is not just that these work experiences are the vital source of individual learning, but that they can be used both by organizations and by individuals to promote individual learning and development.

APPOINTMENTS

One of the key ways in which individuals develop is through appointment to new and challenging jobs, either in the form of promotion or in the form of job rotation or secondment. Certainly the executives interviewed by Morgan McCall and colleagues highlighted changes in jobs as the most important sources of learning and growth. And organizations already act on this implicit assumption, whether or not it is articulated or acknowledged.

If persons are moved too soon, they and the organization may actually derive not just superficial but incorrect lessons from the experience.

The fact that the use of appointments to new positions is not acknowledged as a source of learning and development can itself be a problem, for three reasons. First, if the learning dimension and process are not sufficiently appreciated there may be a temptation to move high potential candidates too frequently. Research suggests that it requires at least two to two-and-a-half years for managers to complete the necessary stages in a new job for the learning process to be accomplished. If persons are moved too soon, they and the organization may actually derive not just superficial but incorrect lessons from the experience.

Second, if appointments are to be used in a truly developmental manner, it is important that the appointment “stretch” and challenge the person chosen for the job. If he or she already possesses all the abilities and experience required for the position, it is doubtful that it will offer him/her an opportunity to grow. For that reason, the research and writing on the aggressive use of appointments for learning and development goes so far as to refer to the ideal principle of selection for a new position as a “strategic misfit” between the candidate and the job.

In the public sector this concept may be more difficult to apply, but it is one that any senior manager should have in mind if appointments are to be viewed, as they should now be, as a key element — perhaps the most important potential tool of all — in promoting executive development and learning. The “deployability” provisions of the Public Service Reform Act should assist managers to appoint employees to positions that will “stretch” and challenge them. The reform and simplification of the classification system will also provide opportunities for people to be moved into a much wider variety of positions, where they will be challenged to learn. The ability and motivation to learn will become even more important, as many of the old boundaries between jobs are broken down, and as less emphasis is placed on the prior possession of a specific set of formal qualifications.

Third, if new job appointments are to be recognized and exploited as a key source of learning, organizations need to develop new attitudes to risk and to mistakes. There can be no genuine learning without some risk taking by those responsible for the appointment, or without some mistakes made by the new job-holder. Mistakes are in fact one of the chief ways through which people learn. McCall and his colleagues tell a delightful anecdote about the manager who made a mistake that cost his company \$100,000. “Plagued by guilt, he suggested to his boss that maybe he should be fired. His boss’s response? Why should I fire you when I’ve just invested \$100,000 in your development?”

Even without changing jobs, there is a wide range of special assignments or tasks that can be consciously exploited, by both individuals and organizations, as learning and development experiences.

ASSIGNMENTS

Even without changing jobs, there is a wide range of special assignments or tasks that can be consciously exploited, by both individuals and organizations, as learning and development experiences. Appointments to special Committees or task forces can give individuals a chance to stretch beyond the limits of a current job, or can provide enrichment to a job in which most challenges have already been met. The same is true of special projects, which can be specifically designed to offer promising employees the opportunity to explore new areas of knowledge and new learning experiences. A third type of experience that can be used to promote learning is special visits to distant parts of the organization, to clients, to special conferences, or to meet colleagues abroad. Some organizations use visits abroad by groups of employees as a key component of their strategic approach to training. (We will say more about this under the discussion of organizational learning below.)

All of these activities are already in use in organizations both for strictly management purposes, and sometimes also for the conscious purpose of learning and development. An interesting example in the Canadian public service is the Corporate Assignments Program of Statistics Canada which, since 1983, has provided temporary lateral transfers on a voluntary basis and has contributed to second-language development, affirmative action, redeployment and relocation, as well as to management development. At CIDA, the Development Officer Professional Development Program provides a combination of training and professional work experiences. EMR has developed a Career Enhancement Service that includes an Assignments Program, an Employee Voluntary Assistance Program and a new Centre for Career Orientation. Environment Canada offers a Career Development Program for Women that combines the three elements of assignments, training and regular meetings.

Since, together with promotions to new jobs, assignments are among the chief sources of learning for working people, it remains to ask how such activities can be used more consciously and effectively for learning purposes, or how the learning component can be reinforced. One way to enhance the learning dimension of these experiences is to ensure that sufficient time is taken at the conclusion of such experiences to reflect on them and to identify the lessons to be learned from them. Some writers even advocate "forced" vacations in remote locations at the conclusion of such assignments in order to ensure the tranquillity required for proper reflection. A structured debriefing in an explicitly

learning framework and setting may also be helpful. For example, CCMD has provided a place for reflection on, and publication of, some of the lessons to be learned from the consultation experiences of the Spicer Commission and the Constitutional Conferences Secretariat. At Statistics Canada, it is possible for professionals to take "internal sabbaticals" for up to six months.

Another way to deepen the learning quality of special assignments and experiences is to build periods and structures for reflection on the process and its lessons directly and explicitly into the assignment itself.

Another way to deepen the learning quality of special assignments and experiences is to build periods and structures for reflection on the process and its lessons directly and explicitly *into* the assignment itself. In this way the project is converted into an "action learning" experience, with action learning's typical rhythm of alternation between action and reflection upon the action taken, leading to a further period of activity. (We have more to say on this theme in the section on Organizational Learning.)

A third device to enhance the learning quality of special assignments is to encourage participants to maintain a "learning log" or journal where they record the key phases and events of the assignment together with insights gained and lessons learned. (We have more to say on this under "Self-Development.")

REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE: "TYPE 2" LEARNING

Precisely because most learning comes from work itself, either on the job or through special assignments, some effort has been made to identify ways in which these experiences can be enhanced, to deepen the learning quality and character of them. Alan Mumford, one of the most prolific writers in the field of management development, has identified a kind of learning he calls "Type 2" learning, which he situates between the informal and "accidental" learning that inevitably accompanies work (Type 1) and the learning achieved through formal learning and development programs (Type 3). Type 2 learning is informal and job-related but consciously undertaken for learning and development purposes. It is defined as "the process of integrating learning and managerial work, so that both are given conscious attention." Mumford distinguishes between two forms of Type 2 learning: he calls these "retrospective" and "prospective" learning. In retrospective learning a manager is asked to reflect back on a given period of work (perhaps as little as a month) and to pick out his or her most important involvements, the results achieved, and the lessons learned, either from the

results or the process. In doing so, managers are encouraged not only to identify what they have learned, but also to achieve a deeper analysis of what they had learned and an understanding of how they learned it.

“Prospective” learning is similar but future-oriented. In this case the manager is invited to identify important activities he or she will be engaged in over the next few weeks or months that might yield some new knowledge or understanding, or offer an opportunity to test some skill or competence. The manager is then invited to plan in more detail what the learning objectives should be and how to make full use of the opportunity for learning purposes. After the experience is completed, the individual is again invited (as in retrospective learning) to reflect on it, and to identify the lessons learned.

Mumford suggests that retrospective and prospective learning can be put together to form a learning “spiral”: retrospective learning experiences lead to the identification of prospective opportunities which in turn lead to retrospective learning which in turn leads to....

The essence of Type 2 learning is the conscious effort that goes into it, the care and planning that enhances and deepens the learning element already present in informal work activities. Type 2 learning exploits what are already the main sources of — and opportunities for — learning, making explicit, deliberate and systematic what is normally implicit, unconscious, marginal, and overlooked.

Learning often happens best when it happens in dialogue, especially with persons of greater or wider experience who can help the individual identify learning opportunities, put his or her learning into context or draw out the key lessons.

COACHING AND COUNSELLING

In order to make full use of the potential of informal learning, perhaps even to raise it to the level of what Alan Mumford calls Type 2 learning, it is apparent that the individual will be greatly assisted if there are others in the organization who can support the learning process. Learning often happens best when it happens in dialogue, especially with persons of greater or wider experience who can help the individual identify learning opportunities, put his or her learning into context or draw out the key lessons.

In order to play the roles of coach or counsellor effectively, members of organizations often require some training in the basic skills essential to such activities, skills such as effective listening, observation, giving feedback. If those undertaking coaching and counselling are to understand themselves as doing so within a context of continuous learn-

ing, they will also require some background or understanding of the learning process, especially the informal work-related learning processes, including the potential of Type 2 learning described above.

Mentoring is a special sub-category of coaching and counselling that usually involves a counsellor or sponsor who is somewhat older than the learning individual, preferably from another department or division, or perhaps from outside the organization itself. Although mentoring is in its infancy and some cloudiness surrounds the concept and its results, a specific set of skills has been identified for it and training is available for organizations that want to make it, together with coaching and counselling, an explicit part of the learning process, supporting a culture and practice of continuous learning.

The important point to be made about coaching, counselling and mentoring is the following: if the informal learning processes of the workplace are to be recognized for what they are and made one of the centrepieces of a continuous learning culture, then "teaching" must go through the same evolution as "training," and find itself anew in the everyday life of organizations as an informal, ongoing and personal activity, fully integrated with the world of work.

All of the processes and requirements of informal learning add to the role of the manager a large additional responsibility as coach, counsellor and "teacher." To some managers this may not be a welcome responsibility.

THE MANAGER AS TEACHER

All of the processes and requirements of informal learning add to the role of the manager a large additional responsibility as coach, counsellor and "teacher." To some managers this may not be a welcome responsibility. Traditionally, managers are interested primarily in getting things done or the business at hand, and they may find it difficult at first to step back from this exclusive focus to see themselves as playing a key role in the learning process of those individuals for whom they are responsible.

It is also entirely possible that a manager and a subordinate may have altogether different personality types or learning styles. In this case developing a successful learning relationship may be an even greater challenge. The research carried out by Morgan McCall and colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership shows that bosses are indeed among the key sources of learning but that, unfortunately, the lesson is as often negative as positive: the boss provides a model to be avoided rather than imitated.

Despite these obstacles, we believe it is essential, especially in a culture of continuous learning, for managers to assume their full responsibility as “teachers” and facilitators of the learning process. This role must be played explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, managers must go beyond their traditional responsibilities for developing an annual “training” plan for individual subordinates in the context of the appraisal process. They should see themselves instead as the key facilitator in the informal learning process that is imbedded in the everyday world of work. The use of appointments, assignments, and visits for explicit learning purposes depends in large measure on the boss or manager using them for this purpose. The manager is also the person best placed to ensure that maximum learning is derived from these experiences by exploiting the full range of action learning techniques, including the Type 2 learning already described. No one better than the manager can encourage an individual to experiment in a conscious way with “retrospective” and “prospective” learning. Managers are also in a position to experiment with “learning contracts” or “learning agreements” with employees, to encourage them to design personal development plans or to maintain learning logs or journals. The manager is in the best position to undertake the roles of coaching and counselling that are essential to support the learning process.

Implicitly, managers are teachers through the model they offer, the habits they cultivate, and the values they display. “Modelling” is in fact one of the most powerful forms of learning.

Implicitly, managers are teachers through the model they offer, the habits they cultivate, and the values they display. “Modelling” is in fact one of the most powerful forms of learning. Individuals consistently report that one of the main ways in which they have learned in the course of their careers is either by imitating certain key bosses, internalizing their values and instincts, or else by consciously choosing another path, avoiding what they regard as the boss’s negative features. In either case, the manager serves as a powerful — often the most powerful — teaching and learning influence.

Managers also teach through their habits. As we note below, for example, reading remains one of the most important sources of learning. Unfortunately, busy managers and public servants do not always develop the habits of reading they should. This is one area where a manager can help: by cultivating a habit of reading widely, and by sharing that reading with colleagues and subordinates on a regular and systematic basis.

Managers should learn to regard each interaction with an employee as having both a managerial *and* a learning dimension. They should ask themselves: What am I learning from this exchange, and what am I helping my subordinates to learn? Am I encouraging them to reflect system-

atically on the activities of the past month or year? Am I helping them to explore the learning to be derived from current tasks, or plan the learning to be derived from future assignments? Is there a coaching or counselling role for me in this exchange? Am I conducting this exchange and attending to the matter at hand in a way that provides a useful model for others, a model from which they can learn? Am I helping them to do so?

A "teaching" or facilitating culture for managers is a keystone of a continuous learning culture for the public service.

A "teaching" or facilitating culture for managers is a keystone of a continuous learning culture for the public service. In order to assess how well they are playing this role, managers may wish to take full advantage of upward feedback techniques. Many federal departments and agencies have undertaken upward feedback exercises and some (Atomic Energy of Canada Limited and Indian and Northern Affairs, for example) have already made it a regular practice.

LEARNING TEAMS

Precisely because managers do not always take up the learning side of their responsibility as easily or readily as circumstances now require, there is wide room for experimentation with alternative ways in which individuals can obtain the feedback, support and structure to engage in continuous learning. Mentors, coaches and counsellors from outside the immediate work group can help. So can peers and colleagues.

One way that organizations have found to organize this alternative learning process is through learning teams. At the Caroline Complex of Shell Canada in the foothills of Alberta, a highly innovative organization has established learning teams of four to five people who meet regularly to focus on individual learning about self and personal effectiveness. The members of the team are accountable to the learning team leader to report on progress, and they are supported by three internal organizational effectiveness resources (one for each 50 employees) whose role is to coach, mentor, guide, act as a third party in conflict resolution, as well as to support the learning teams.

It is easy to see how such learning teams could be used to support the kind of informal learning process, including Type 2 retrospective and prospective learning, described above.

This example indicates that, for progress on developing a continuous learning culture to be made, it is not necessary to wait for managers,

key though they are, to take up their part in the learning process. Employees and subordinates themselves can start laying the foundation of continuous individual learning that is indispensable to organizational learning.

Organizations awakened to the potential of continuous learning can do much to assist, to put in place the structures, resources and policies to enhance and support learning. But in the final analysis it is the individual who must play the crucial part.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Ultimately, individual learning is a matter of personal responsibility. Organizations awakened to the potential of continuous learning can do much to assist, to put in place the structures, resources and policies to enhance and support learning. But in the final analysis it is the individual who must play the crucial part. That is one of the lessons of the learning approach: learning is something that only the learner can do, no matter how much others may help.

For individuals interested in initiating their own process of learning and self-development, a number of techniques and approaches can be employed:

- *self-analysis*: through a variety of tests, questionnaires and instruments to identify personality type, competencies, potential, needs. An assessment centre, professional counselling, or workshop may be helpful. A number of work-books, checklists and questionnaires are widely available;
- *planning*: a personal development plan may be helpful, especially if supported by the organization;
- a *learning agreement* or contract can be helpful for setting goals and measuring achievement;
- a *learning log*, journal or work diary can help to draw out the learning dimension from work experiences and events;
- *modelling*: the powerful role of bosses or mentors in learning has already been mentioned;
- *feedback*: individuals can seek feedback from superiors, colleagues, peers and subordinates. The latter are an invaluable source of perspective and learning and are often overlooked;
- *networks*: this not just a matter of “networking.” Networks structured around themes of common interest can be a powerful source of information and learning;

- *learning teams*: the potential of learning teams as an anchor for informal learning of the Type 2 variety has already been highlighted. Although organizational support is invaluable, individuals do not need to wait for it in order to establish them. They can take the initiative.

For organizations committed to fostering continuous learning, it is important to remember that the best learning is self-initiated and directed.

For organizations committed to fostering continuous learning, it is important to remember that the best learning is self-initiated and directed. For this reason, those responsible for “training” should not think only in terms of programs or processes in which they do something to someone else. They should also understand their role as a supporter and facilitator for self-learning and should assemble the resources, materials and instruments necessary for self-development as well as initiating and championing the concepts and practices (such as learning teams) which will allow it to flower.

In order to facilitate self-development, a number of departments have established or made available the following types of services and resources: self-help career development guides and instruments (Forestry, Revenue Canada Taxation, CCMD); interactive computer self-learning centres (Public Service Commission); career resource centres (Secretary of State, RCT); and self-directed learning centres (Statistics Canada, Canadian International Development Agency, Western Economic Diversification, Energy Mines and Resources); professional career counselling (Labour, EMR); career advancement seminars (PSC, Auditor General); and career diversification programs (Fisheries and Oceans).

Public sector organizations may find this list helpful in assessing the degree to which policies currently in place are designed to support a culture of individual learning.

C. A Checklist for a Learning Culture

Alan Mumford has devised a check-list to enable organizations to assess whether they have adopted the attitudes and measures that support and nourish a learning culture. Public sector organizations may find this list helpful in assessing the degree to which policies currently in place are designed to support a culture of individual learning. According to this view, an organization can be said to encourage individual learning and development if and when:

- it encourages managers and employees to identify their own learning needs;
- it provides a regular review of performance and learning for the individual;
- it encourages individuals to set challenging learning goals for themselves;
- it provides feedback at the time on both performance and achieved learning;
- it reviews the performance of managers in helping to develop others;
- it seeks to provide new experiences from which individuals can learn;
- it provides or facilitates the use of training on the job;
- it tolerates some mistakes, provided individuals try to learn from them;
- it encourages individuals to review, conclude and plan learning activities;
- it encourages individuals to challenge the traditional ways of doing things.

The last point brings us directly to organizational learning.

Individual Learning

Questions for Managers

1. What proportion of your annual budget and staff time is devoted to formal learning activities?
2. What proportion of your organization's formal learning activities takes place within the organization, within the wider organization of the public service, or externally?
3. How much of your organization's formal learning activities uses current problems and challenges of your organization as a primary focus?
4. Do you use assignments, appointments and other informal learning opportunities to develop your employees? Could you?
5. How does your organization measure up to the "checklist for a learning culture" above?

Suggestions for Managers

1. For the next week, try thinking of yourself as a "teacher" as well as a manager. Think of each working situation and exchange as an opportunity to set an example or to enhance the learning of others.
2. In every meeting ask yourself, and perhaps others, "What have we learned here?" or "What have we learned since our last meeting?"
3. Experiment with Type 2 learning, both retrospective and prospective, for yourself and your subordinates. Encourage them to reflect on what they have learned from recent experiences and to anticipate the learning opportunities of future assignments.
4. If you think it would help, seek out some training in coaching and counselling.
5. Review your own reading habits, and get into a regular reading routine. Circulate reading material in your organization and make time to discuss it at your meetings.
6. Encourage the formation of "learning teams" in your organization and provide the necessary support to make them work.

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3. Organizational Learning

As observed at the beginning of this report, the learning theme has generated a great deal of confusion about terminology, about concepts and even about what is relevant to be discussed under the theme's broad heading. This is especially true of organizational learning which, like TQM, has a marked tendency to turn into a grab-bag of every recent management innovation or fad.

As individuals, whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, we are engaged in a constant process of learning about the world. The problem is that individual learning does not lead automatically or necessarily to learning by the organization to which the individual belongs.

There is even some confusion about the name of the concept itself. Some writers and reports refer to organizational learning, some prefer the concept of the "learning organization." This report tries to avoid using the latter term and sticks instead to the term organizational learning, for three reasons. The first is that the expression the "learning organization" puts the emphasis on the *noun* and thus inclines to reify the concept: it implies the existence of some concrete entity, the contours of which can be easily described and imitated. Because it puts the accent on "organization" rather than learning, it also reinforces the tendency to embrace within the discussion every characteristic of contemporary, innovative organizations rather than focusing on those things which have more particularly to do with learning itself. It thus succeeds only in adding to the muddiness and confusion.

The second reason is the obverse of the first. The theme of organizational learning puts the accent on the verb, thus suggesting something open, ongoing and unfinished rather than something definitive and closed: it suggests a process rather than a thing, a voyage rather than a destination.

The third reason is that the term organizational learning puts the accent where it should be, on learning. And that is where it belongs. The pages that follow survey a number of ways in which learning can be used to enhance the performance of organizations and the quality of life in them.

Before turning to these examples, it is appropriate to say something about the relationship between individual and organizational learning.

As individuals, whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, we are engaged in a constant process of learning about the world. We can do this poorly or we can do it well: much of the discussion in the previous section was about ways to do it better in organizational settings. But it is hard not to do it at all.

The problem is that individual learning does not lead automatically or necessarily to learning by the organization to which the individual belongs. In many organizations it never does. Individual members of an

Unless deliberate steps are taken to add the second loop to the learning process, it remains short-circuited within the closed circle of the individual alone.

organization may be learning things regularly about ways in which the organization could improve its performance, ways in which it is falling short of the rhetoric it employs or the goals it has set for itself, ways in which the environment is changing or in which the organization is tripping over its own feet. But unless the circumstances are propitious and the culture welcoming, this knowledge may remain forever private. It may never be shared with or absorbed by the organization as a whole, nor used to correct its course or change its ways. Although errors are detected and corrected, the process of error correction may actually disguise the need for deeper forms of organizational learning. In fact, individual learning may actually *inhibit* organizational learning: the individual (or his or her work group) may become so adept at correcting errors that the organization may never be obliged to confront the deeper organizational problems from which the errors arise.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, who have been among the North American pioneers in the field of organizational learning, capture this distinction between the individual and the organization in the concepts of “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning. By “single-loop” they mean the learning experience of the individual which, unless it is widened, benefits only himself or herself and never becomes imbedded in the thought or practice of the organization. By “double-loop” they refer to learning which flows outward from the individual to illuminate and influence the organization itself.

Individual learning is the foundation of organizational learning. Without individual learning there can be no organizational learning. But individual learning does not lead automatically to organizational learning. As Argyris and Schon put it: “Individual learning is a necessary but insufficient condition for organizational learning.” Unless deliberate steps are taken to add the second loop to the learning process, it remains short-circuited within the closed circle of the individual alone. In the pages that follow we examine some of the steps that can be taken, or approaches adopted, to add the second loop, to build on continuous individual learning in order to reach the level of organizational learning, the level at which insights and understanding blossom outward to be absorbed by the organization itself and to shape its future course.

A. Bringing Learning to Work

One of the discernible trends in the field of “training” is the growing tendency to break down the barriers which have traditionally existed between learning and work. There is now a growing conviction about the need to bring learning to work, and work to learning. Contemporary thinking about training is moving away from the view that training is something marginal, isolated, focused on the individual and occurring outside the normal workplace to the view that “learning” is something continuous, affecting everyone or most people in an organization, and imbedded in the worklife of organizations, using where possible the live challenges and problems of the workplace itself as the raw material and starting point for the learning process.

This new approach to training and learning is reflected in each of the remaining sections of our report. Each section discusses some innovative practice or concept that can be used to enhance learning in and by organizations. In this first section we look at some of the common-sense or everyday ways in which we can turn the ongoing life of organizations into a learning experience.

MEETINGS

Let us start with meetings. Every organization holds meetings. Some of these are weekly, some are less frequent, perhaps annual or semi-annual planning meetings. Each of these are opportunities for learning but their full potential may not be exploited, or there may be genuine obstacles blocking learning on these occasions. How can meetings become more regular learning experiences?

One of the most obvious ways in which meetings can be used as learning experiences is to incorporate in them elements of “formal” learning. In other words, some of the things that normally happen only on “formal” training courses outside the office can be brought right into the office itself. For example, many organizations now set aside time in meetings, especially the less frequent planning meetings, for formal presentations from outside resource persons on topics of interest to the future health and success of the organization, ranging from the changing external environment to contemporary theories of organization and organizational development. In this way the “formal” development

One of the most obvious ways in which meetings can be used as learning experiences is to incorporate in them elements of “formal” learning.

activities that normally take place outside the office can be brought right into the regular business life of the organization.

Such “formal” learning experiences in business or planning meetings need not be restricted to presentations, however. They can also take the form of exercises designed to allow the business unit or management team to understand better its own internal dynamics. Thus a regular management committee meeting or a planning meeting can be used to conduct a “Myers-Briggs” exercise, for example. Led by a competent resource person, such exercises allow the group to understand better the range of personality types within the organization, the unique contribution that each type brings to the ongoing work of the organization, and the way in which the interaction of the various personality types affects the internal dynamic and communication problems of the organization. It can be a team-building as well as a learning experience, deepening the self-knowledge and understanding of a group that works together on a daily basis but may not know or understand each other very well.

Regular meetings can also be used for more “informal” kinds of learning. For example, some organizations have found it useful (especially during periods of major organizational change, but not limited to these) to include a qualified external resource person in regular business or executive meetings. The resource person does not make formal presentations in the previous sense but may intervene during discussion of regular agenda items in either of two ways: from the perspective of substance or process.

Learning is also deepened by being related directly to the concrete problems at hand: the chances of learning retention in these circumstances are immeasurably strengthened.

As far as substance is concerned, the external resource person may intervene in normal discussion of regular business items to point out how some issue or question under discussion is illuminated by management theory, by the relevant literature and debates on the topic or by experiments and management precedents elsewhere. In this way the real current business of the organization is used as an occasion for learning and is illuminated by the insights of theory and example. At the same time learning is also deepened by being related directly to the concrete problems at hand: the chances of learning retention in these circumstances are immeasurably strengthened.

An external resource person can also be invited to intervene in regular business meetings from the point of view of process. One of the major obstacles to genuine learning in many organizations is the organizational culture itself. The leader of the organization may think that he or she favours open exchange and discussion, but his/her actions, signals and unconscious attitudes may not really encourage others to be

open and frank. By the same token, other members of a management group may not be forthcoming or encourage others to be so because of territorial interests or a desire for promotion, because of a genuine concern not to give offence or cause distress by honest comment, or for some other reason. The result is often that organizations are unable to share information honestly, and thus cannot learn or grow.

The external resource person can help to remedy this problem by intervening in the discussion to comment on the process as well as on substance. Where someone's view is being overlooked or given short shrift, where someone is holding back unnecessarily, where body language or other signals are discouraging open discussion, where the leader's intentions are being misread or misrepresented, perhaps even by the leader, the external observer can intervene to draw things out into the open, to invite the participants to pause and reflect on the dynamic of the discussion, to clarify misunderstandings, and generally to promote learning by encouraging open, honest and constructive dialogue. As already mentioned, some organizations have found the presence of such a neutral observer especially helpful in times of accelerated change, organizational transformation, or strategic reassessment. The role of external resource persons is also important in circumstances where organizational learning is being used to overcome "organizational defences," as discussed in section E below.

Some organizations have found the presence of such a neutral observer especially helpful in times of accelerated change, organizational transformation, or strategic reassessment.

MANAGERS AS TEACHERS

As we have already noted in our discussion of individual learning in the first part of this report, the leader in any group or organization has a key role to play in the learning process. In fact one of the things this report aims to accomplish is to encourage public service managers to think of themselves as teachers and learners, teachers who have something to give to their organization and its people, learners who have something to gain from and with their team. The opportunity for teaching and learning is present in almost every transaction and exchange within an organization.

Meetings are an obvious place to start. The chairperson should approach each meeting, especially special or planning meetings, as potential learning events. One of the key questions to be asked is always "What have we learned?" since last year, or last month or the last meeting; "What have we learned?" from discussion of this item, or from this

meeting. (A good example of stocktaking and reflecting on the lessons of experience can be found in the practices followed by Customs and Excise in launching the GST. One useful device was to hold regular stocktaking meetings which provided the DM and her senior colleagues with a chance to step back from the regular day-to-day problems and to get a perspective on the entire project, with a view to taking corrective action and anticipating future problems.) The role of the chairperson in any meeting is inevitably a teaching role and it will be a more constructive one when it is consciously assumed, when leaders recognize that they are teaching by example whether they like it or not, and when they accept the responsibility openly and resolutely.

The teaching role is not limited to meetings. In each of his/her relations with subordinates and members of the team, the leader should ask herself or himself how these can be used to advance the learning of a subordinate or colleague, or the learning of the organization as a whole. In private relationships as in public meetings, the leader of an organization, big or small, is inevitably a teacher, by default if not by purpose. One of the requirements of continuous and organizational learning is for managers to take up this challenge consciously, to see their role as teacher, developer and facilitator of learning for all those for whom they are ultimately responsible.

One of the key ways managers can promote organizational learning and a learning culture is by encouraging a habit of reading.

As we have already noted, one of the key ways managers can promote organizational learning and a learning culture is by encouraging a habit of reading. The first step is for the manager to be or become a regular reader. The second step is for the manager to circulate important readings to staff, perhaps with some brief comment or overview, highlighting points, lessons or implications to be derived from them. Subordinates can be encouraged to do the same, or to use the manager's own circulation process. A third important step is to schedule time in regular meetings to discuss and debate the readings circulated. This helps to ensure that material circulated is actually read. But, more important, it underlines the fact that ideas must come alive through use and through dialogue, and it helps to establish a living culture of learning and discussion in the organization. It also helps to establish a common base of information and ideas, an essential step in the development of a vigorous organizational culture.

Bringing Learning to Work

Questions for Managers

1. Do you use weekly or planning meetings as learning events for your organization?
2. Do you think of yourself as a teacher as well as a manager? Do you consciously lead and stimulate the learning process within your organization as a whole?

Suggestions for Managers

1. Try to incorporate “formal” learning and presentations into your regular meetings.
2. Experiment with the use of a regular external resource person in your regular meetings. Such a person may be asked to intervene in the discussion of regular business to illuminate it either from the point of view of substance or process. Such a resource person may be particularly helpful in periods of major change or transformation.
3. Make use of a “Myers-Briggs” or other similar exercise to promote organizational learning and team-building in your organization.
4. Schedule time at your regular management meetings to discuss a reading circulated in advance.
5. Make clear to your colleagues and subordinates that reading is as important as other work and is not a sign that the reader has nothing better to do.
6. Regularly schedule time to review lessons learned: from a discussion, a meeting, an activity or project; since last year, last month or last meeting.

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B. Organizational Learning as Business Process Improvement

One of the obvious purposes for which organizations learn is to improve the way they do things. This may be the case at a broad strategic level. It may also be so at a very concrete level, the level of the organization's detailed business processes. In this section we examine a few of the ways in which the culture of continuous learning can be employed to improve an organization's operational performance at a very practical level. In later sections we will do the same thing at an increasingly strategic level.

One of the important ways in which continuous learning can help to improve operational performance or an organization's "business processes" is through a continuous effort of comparison with other organizations.

BEST PRACTICES AND BENCHMARKING

One of the important ways in which continuous learning can help to improve operational performance or an organization's "business processes" is through a continuous effort of comparison with other organizations. The first step in this procedure is to identify a process, activity or feature of your organization where improved performance might be possible, desirable or essential. The second step is to identify another organization (or another part of the same organization) where a similar process or activity may be carried out with notable efficiency or effectiveness. The third step is to study the practices of the model organization. The fourth step is to identify the features of the "best practice" elsewhere that can be adapted to your own organization to improve its performance.

In the private sector this process of identifying and adapting best practices has come to be known as "benchmarking." One of the first and classic instances of this process was Xerox's celebrated benchmarking of L.L. Bean's warehousing and materials handling methods. Since that original example, benchmarking has blossomed as a concept, spawning a rich literature and a technical methodology. The essence of the methodology remains, however, the four steps described above.

The most important feature of the benchmarking concept is its continuous character, the unending search for examples and standards that can help an organization to rethink its internal processes or raise its standards of performance. Another important benefit is its contribution to organizational self-knowledge. In order to carry out the process

effectively, an organization must begin by examining and understanding itself, by documenting and analyzing its own processes and procedures in order to identify those tasks or activities for which instructive comparisons should be sought. This step alone is an important contribution to the continuous learning of an organization. Continuous learning about the external environment is, of course, an equal benefit.

In the public service a variety of best practices activities are already underway, both formally and informally. CCMD's Expo Innovations was an important contribution to sharing information about management innovations in the public sector. The work and projects of the Council on Administrative Renewal has a similar objective, aiming to simplify and streamline the government's administrative processes through identifying or developing prototypes for such things as an integrated system of financial and materiel management.

WORK-OUT

A Work-Out is a relatively simple concept whose purpose is to identify ways in which an organization can work faster and more simply, while making the employees more active participants and more committed to its way of working.

Another striking example of organizational learning used to improve organizational business processes is General Electric's "Work-Out" methodology. The Work-Out approach emerged from GE's Crotonville training centre in the 1980s as part of its broad aim to link training more closely to the concrete business challenges and problems of the organization. Since then it has been generalized for use throughout the whole GE organization and even for use with GE customers.

A Work-Out is a relatively simple concept whose purpose is to identify ways in which an organization can work faster and more simply, eliminating unnecessary steps or redundant work that adds no value, while making the employees more active participants and more committed to its way of working. A Work-Out can be employed for organizations or units of organizations, of various sizes and complexity. It can be used to address very large problems or relatively modest ones.

There are two essential features of a Work-Out. The first is that it involve a broad spectrum of employees at all levels and from all functions, to promote cross-functional awareness and communication, upward communication and a "boundaryless" organization. The second essential feature of a Work-Out is that it conclude with a "town hall" style meeting in which the management of the organization or unit listens to the recommendations developed by the group as a whole during the Work-Out, and makes immediate, public decisions either to imple-

The typical pattern of a Work-Out session, lasting from one to several days, is a process of about five to seven stages, alternating rhythmically between plenary and workshop sessions.

ment or reject each one of them and to explain why. This concluding phase, with its immediate public decisions and accountability, is crucial to give the whole process focus and credibility.

The typical pattern of a Work-Out session, lasting from one to several days, is a process of about five to seven stages, alternating rhythmically between plenary and workshop sessions. A Work-Out may be focused on issues or problems facing the organization, or on process mapping itself. In the first case, it will typically proceed through the stages of issue identification, ranking of priorities and action planning, prior to the concluding "town hall" meeting in which recommendations are presented to management.

The contribution of a Work-Out type of exercise to organizational learning is multifold. It breaks down barriers between horizontal functions and vertical layers, allowing information and insights to circulate more freely. It encourages openness and candour by bringing issues forward for discussion that may have been long buried or neglected. By focusing on practical problems, including process mapping, it helps the organization to learn more about its real life and activities and how those might be rearranged or reordered to allow all members of the organization to devote their energies to tasks that are genuinely productive and useful. By bringing all levels of the organization together for discussion and decision it allows employees to learn more about management's perspective and priorities, while allowing managers to gain a more accurate understanding of the realities of the organization, of its problems and procedures, and of the outlook and ideas of employees at all levels and in all areas. In order to encourage the trust, candour and openness that are essential for such learning to occur, it has been found helpful for the Work-Out process to be facilitated by a leader from outside the immediate operation, though not necessarily from outside the wider organization of which the unit may be a part.

A learning experience of the Work-Out type can benefit an organization in many ways and at two levels. At the practical level, it can help to eliminate obstacles to performance, to identify priorities, to speed up decisions and processes, to eliminate bureaucracy. At another level it can contribute to change and enhance the organizational culture by improving communication, broadening participation and encouraging greater employee commitment and "ownership."

An experience of the Work-Out type accomplishes both of these things by promoting organizational self-knowledge. To know oneself fully and honestly is as important to the life of organizations as it has

been understood to be for individual human beings for thousands of years. Knowing oneself depends in part on acknowledging the gap between what we say about and to ourselves, and what we actually do. This is a theme we will pursue in later sections of this report.

Organizational Learning as Business Process Improvement

Questions for Managers

1. Are there obstacles of process or procedure that are inhibiting the high performance of your organization?
2. Are there barriers to the flow of information and ideas across functions, divisions and levels in your organization?
3. Are the decision and delivery processes in your organization too slow? too bureaucratic?
4. Has your organization identified its key priorities, issues, problems? Is there broad agreement and ownership for these decisions?
5. Do your employees feel they are part of one, unified and coherent team?
6. Have you studied systematically the business processes in your organization and compared them to those of other organizations with a reputation for effectiveness?

Suggestions for Managers

1. Explore the literature on best practices and benchmarking and consider how it might apply to your own organization.
2. Investigate the Work-Out methodology and consider whether an exercise of this kind would benefit your organization.

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C. Organizational Learning and Strategic Planning

Organizations learn about many things and for many purposes. One of the things they learn about is the changing external environment to which the organization must continuously adapt.

Organizations learn about many things and for many purposes. One of the things they learn about is the changing external environment to which the organization must continuously adapt. One of the purposes for which they do so is to predict the future and develop plans that will allow the organization to adapt successfully to a changing world.

Obviously one of the basic requirements of organizational learning is to have adequate means to gather and receive vital information from the surrounding environment. In order to learn, organizations must be sensitively attuned to the world around them, they must develop a variety of means to gather information and insight, and they must ensure that such information finds its way into the decision-making and planning process. Environmental scanning is an important process and should be used by organizations to sharpen their ability to see clearly what is already happening in the world and discern trends.

But even if organizations are well attuned to the external world, how can they use this information to predict the future and to plan for it? The answer, as far as predicting is concerned, is that they cannot. No matter how much we try, we cannot see the future; we can see only the past, and make whatever extrapolations we can from it. Often these will be wrong, because events rarely develop in a linear fashion from the past to the future in the way our minds almost always expect them to do.

How then can organizations prepare for an unpredictable future? One of the ways they can do so is through a form of organizational learning. In a now celebrated case, the Royal Dutch Shell organization developed an ability to respond to unexpected environmental shocks through a process of scenario building. The managers in the organization developed a wide range of hypotheses about future changes to the external environment, from the probable to the unlikely. For each of these potential "scenarios" they proceeded to develop a contingency plan outlining how the organization should respond, regardless of whether the scenario was plausible or outlandish. Through this process of organizational learning the Shell organization was prepared to deal with the unexpected collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s.

From this experience the Shell planners have developed a planning process based on mapping the working assumptions or "mental models" of the company managers, then playing with the variables and inviting

the managers to consider the implications. In this manner the tacit assumptions of the various members of the management team become explicit, the group begins to develop a common language, and to prepare itself for a variety of possible futures.

From the Shell experience two important lessons can be derived. The first is that organizational learning can play an important role in strategic planning. The Shell organization accomplished this by developing a wide variety of future scenarios in order to assist managers to prepare themselves for an unforeseeable and unpredictable future. In the federal public service, Statistics Canada has also turned its planning process into a vehicle for organizational learning: the process includes a "what if" approach requiring managers to identify "contingencies" and "efficiencies." General Electric has also harnessed organizational learning and strategic planning through the innovative Business Management Course and Executive Development Course developed by GE's Management Development Institute at Crotonville. In these two programs senior managers work on the real business and strategic business problems of various GE organizations and they do so in a global setting. The output from such programs is not just enhanced learning for the executives but a rich new source of strategic insights and planning.

"The only relevant learning in a company is the learning by those people who have the power to act."

The second lesson to be derived from the Shell experience is the importance of "mental models." As Arie de Geus, one of the Shell planners, has remarked: "The only relevant learning in a company is the learning by those people who have the power to act. So the real purpose of effective planning is not to make plans but to change the microcosm, the mental models that these decision makers carry in their heads." In other words, each of us carries around a set of assumptions or "mental models" that determine how we see our world and what is important in it. These assumptions or models are very powerful, but they can also be very limiting. They may prevent us from seeing some important dimension of the world, or from reframing our world so that new issues and new approaches may emerge.

This question of mental models is one on which Peter Senge has put great emphasis in his much-cited writings on the learning organization. The point is an important one. It is clear from the Shell example that organizations aspiring to develop a culture of continuous learning should begin (or perhaps conclude) by learning about themselves, especially the assumptions, presuppositions, values and mental models that both structure and limit their way of seeing the world.

Managers and leaders should make it one of their chief goals to uncover these assumptions, test them, and enlarge them so that there may be a better fit between them and reality. A number of techniques to do this are discussed in later sections of this report. One technique that deserves attention is the “mapping” methodology developed by Shell.

Organizational Learning and Strategic Planning

Questions for Managers

1. How do you carry out environmental scanning and strategic planning in your organizations? What techniques, procedures or abilities are encouraged to develop sensitivity to and awareness of the external world?
2. Have you considered how the assumptions and accepted mental frameworks in your organization may colour or distort its picture of the external world, block internal communication, or limit the organization's ability to respond to change?

Suggestions for Managers

1. Experiment with the development of a range of contrasting scenarios for the future external environment of your organization and consider how you would respond to each. Involve your management team, and perhaps the whole organization, in exploring the implications of each of these scenarios.
2. Attempt to map the implicit working assumptions (or "mental models") employed by your organization and the various parts of it. Extrapolate from these models and consider the implications. Consider how a change in the assumptions would change the outcomes. You can do this internally or you could use an external resource person to lead this exercise.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

Daniel H. Kim, "The Link between Individual and Organizational Learning," *Sloan Management Review*, Fall 1993, p. 37-50.

D. Organizational Learning and Strategic Management: Imparting an Organizational Culture

The preceding sections this report have looked at some of the ways in which the learning activities that have normally been a part of “training” activities undertaken outside the workplace can be brought into the office itself. We saw that the everyday world of work can be made to support not merely individual learning but learning for the organization as a whole. We began by observing how organizational learning could be used to address the concrete, everyday problems of the organization, including business process improvement. We then saw how it could be employed for more strategic purposes including strategic planning. This section looks at how learning can be used to support the broad strategic management of an organization, especially the development of a strong organizational culture. The last three sections were particularly concerned with bringing learning to work. This one examines what can be achieved for strategic management by bringing work to learning.

A rapidly evolving world no longer permits organizations to be tightly directed and controlled from the top or from the centre: it requires instead a high level of local initiative and creativity.

In both the theory and practice of management over the last decade, increasing importance has been given to the role of culture and values in an organization. A rapidly evolving world no longer permits organizations to be tightly directed and controlled from the top or from the centre: it requires instead a high level of local initiative and creativity. With this realization has come a parallel recognition of the need for something, some organizing principle, to provide the coherence that can no longer be provided by central command and control. The result has been a growing emphasis on organizational culture, on the values, attitudes, and outlook of the organization. If these are well developed and articulated, and widely shared within the organization, so the argument goes, then the need for central direction will be diminished. The multitude of individual decisions, locally determined, will cohere because they proceed from a coherent set of assumptions and instincts. This new management principle is sometimes referred to as the principle of “alignment.”

It was perhaps natural for many organizations to see that learning and training activities could be used to transmit or impart organizational culture and values. This avenue was especially attractive to organizations facing stiff challenges and engaged in the process of fundamental organizational transformation. As a result, in an increasing number of organizations learning activities are not peripheral or random but

explicitly harnessed to the urgent needs of the organization itself, especially the need for rapid organizational change and the development of a new organizational culture.

Perhaps the leading example of learning activities designed to support the strategic management of an organization is that of General Electric's Management Development Institute at Crotonville, New York. Since the early 1980s, "Crotonville" (as it is known) has developed an innovative range of programs some of which we have already discussed, such as Work-Out and the BMC/EDC programs, the thrust of which is to link learning activities directly to the solution of current business problems or to assist in the development of corporate strategy. At the same time, both these new programs and the more traditional development programs, geared to career stages and progression, have been designed to communicate corporate values and a strong corporate culture, and to imprint a strong sense of strategic direction on the whole GE organization. GE has been at some pains to elaborate a detailed statement of corporate values, including the core (shorthand) values of speed, simplicity and self-confidence. The programs offered at Crotonville to large numbers of GE staff at all stages of their careers are designed to inculcate these values throughout the organization. Those who cannot share these values are encouraged to pursue their careers elsewhere.

GE has been at some pains to elaborate a detailed statement of corporate values, including the core (shorthand) values of speed, simplicity and self-confidence.

While GE has been one of the pioneers and leaders in linking learning activities to strategic direction and management, it is by no means alone. In the U.S., similar experiments have been documented at General Foods, Xerox, Motorola, and Federated Department Stores. In the U.K., training programs have been used to attain strategic objectives by British Airways, British Petroleum and L'Oréal. In Canada, IBM Canada developed a new generation of learning programs designed to instil the new range of values and outlooks deemed necessary to turn the company around in its efforts to cope with an increasingly competitive environment. These programs were so successful they were eventually used throughout the IBM organization abroad. At Canada Trust, an Executive Institute that provides training to new executives is staffed and taught entirely by the senior executives of the company in order to ensure a common set of values and attitudes. Others have used corporate retreats and conferences for the same purpose.

Most of these programs have some common features that are important to note:

- the impetus for them comes from the very top of the organization;
- the programs have very precise and clearly articulated objectives;

- the emphasis is on the achievement of the organization's strategic objectives and developing the means to do so;
- senior management is involved in the design of the program;
- senior executives of the organization take an important role in the delivery of the program.

Corporate learning activities and events can be used to spread a common set of values, common attitudes and a common outlook throughout an organization in order to achieve its strategic objectives.

The broad lesson to be gained here is that corporate learning activities and events can be used to spread a common set of values, common attitudes and a common outlook throughout an organization in order to achieve its strategic objectives. In the literature this is held to be an important dimension of organizational learning. The intended result is that an organization spontaneously and instinctively "aligned" through the sharing of this common outlook will be much less in need of central coordination and control; and its constituent units will be able to develop the creative, responsive and entrepreneurial behaviours that a rapidly evolving environment requires.

The cautionary note that needs to be sounded here is that such an approach, to be successful, needs to be balanced or augmented with some of the techniques and approaches reviewed in the following sections, approaches designed to get at the truth of organizations and to encourage communication both horizontally and vertically in an organization. Unless these processes are also in place, organizational learning focused on the inculcation of common values or of a common strategic intent risks remaining confined within single-loop learning alone. Unless it succeeds in breaking through to double-loop learning, such learning would fall very short — might even be the opposite — of genuine organizational learning. It could even lead to the stultifying dangers of "group-think" that screens out variations from the consensus and discourages the critical thinking, so essential for healthy organizations, confusing it with disloyalty.

Organizational Learning and Strategic Management: Imparting an Organizational Culture

Questions for Managers

1. Are learning and training activities peripheral to your organization? Or are they used as one of your key instruments for strategic management?
2. Does your organization have a clear vision of where it is going, a broadly diffused understanding of its underlying strategic intent, and a unifying organizational culture? Could the learning and training activities in your organization be used more consciously and systematically to achieve these goals and to unify the organization around a shared understanding of goals and values?

Suggestions for Managers

1. Consider shifting your learning and training resources from those that are exclusively driven by individual needs and interests to those that are consciously designed to help achieve the organization's key goals.
2. In order to use learning activities you will need, first, to have a clear idea of where you want to take the organization, and, second, at least an initial idea of the aptitudes that are needed to get you there.
3. Learning activities can be used to surface new ideas or insights and to forge a new consensus as well as to nourish an organizational culture on which there is already prior agreement.
4. Using learning activities for strategic purposes requires the direct involvement of the leaders of your organization, both in the design stage and in the actual delivery of learning programs and activities. It requires a strong commitment from you and your management team.
5. Weigh the potential for "groupthink" in your organization and consider ways to overcome it, including assigning specific roles as "devil's advocate" or "critical evaluator," and using the techniques to overcome organizational "defences" discussed in the following section.

Suggestions for Further Reading

James F. Bolt, "Tailor Executive Development to Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December, 1985, p. 168-176.

Albert A. Vicere, "The Changing Paradigm for Executive Development," *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 44-47.

D.E. Hussey, "Implementing Corporate Strategy: Using Management Education and Training," *Long Range Planning*, vol. 18, no. 5 (1985), p. 28-37.

James L. Noel and Ram Charan, "Leadership Development at GE's Crotonville," *Human Resource Management*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1988), p. 433-447.

John Burgoyne, "Management Development for the Individual and the Organization," *Personnel Management*, June 1988, p. 40-44.

Paul A.L. Evans, "Management Development as Glue Technology," *Human Resource Planning*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1992), p. 85-106.

Some of the most interesting and promising innovations in management learning have taken the form of what is called "action learning."

E. Organizational Learning as Organizational Self-Knowledge: Action Learning

One of the most important developments in management learning and development over the past decades has been the growing realization that learning occurs best when it is directly related to real work, to "doing" or to action. As a result of this insight some of the most interesting and promising innovations in management learning have taken the form of what is called "action learning." In traditional forms of training, activities take place outside the workplace and the subject matter, while it may be relevant to normal work, it is not normally taken from the workplace itself. Even where the case method is employed, the cases examined are from somewhere else and are no longer current. In action learning, by contrast, the cases are live, still to be resolved, and are addressed in the workplace itself.

On the basis of these assumptions — that managers learn best by taking action and reflecting on the action — the pioneers of "action learning" (beginning in the 1950s with an Englishman named Reg Revans) have developed an alternative model of learning which has many variants but normally has some of the following features:

- a number of managers get together at regular intervals to discuss a problem(s) or challenge(s) they are facing in the workplace;
- the group (or "set" as the action learning literature often calls it, following Revans) usually has an expert resource person (though the role of this person changes from model to model);
- after discussing the problem, project, or challenge with the group and the resource person, the managers return to the workplace to take action;
- after a period of time the group meets again to discuss the progress to date, results achieved, and problems still to be resolved;
- the managers then return to the workplace to take further action;
- these two phases of reflection/discussion and action continue to alternate through the life of the program.

These are the main common features of action learning programs but there are numerous variations, only one of which can we discuss here.

The participants in an action learning program may come from quite different organizations. This was in fact the model favoured by Revans. But they may also come from the same organization, or even from the same work or business unit. This second model of action learning which is gaining increasing currency is one of the most powerful models of organizational learning at work.

One striking example of action learning employed within a single organization as a vehicle for organizational learning and development is the "Change Acceleration" program initiated by GE's Management Development Institute at Crotonville. In this program the action learning "set" is an intact business unit or management team. Over a period of some ninety days, the team follows the rhythm described above: periods of retreat and reflection on the key business problems faced by the unit alternate with periods of intense action to address the problems identified.

In their pioneering work on organizational learning, Chris Argyris and Donald Schon identified the major obstacle to organizational performance as the wide gulf that normally separates an organization's "espoused theory of action" from its "theory-in-use."

The action learning approach can also be used for much deeper forms of organizational learning, forms that go beyond immediate business problems to the more profound forms of organizational self-knowledge and to the underlying obstacles that separate promise from performance. In their pioneering work on organizational learning, Chris Argyris and Donald Schon identified the major obstacle to organizational performance as the wide gulf that normally separates an organization's "espoused theory of action" from its "theory-in-use." In ordinary language, this is the distance between what an organization says, and what it really does.

In most organizations, individuals or even groups within organizations confront this disjunction every day and learn to live with it, making the adjustments or corrections necessary to perform a certain task or function ("single-loop" learning). But they rarely go the further step of making the more fundamental correction, of resolving the underlying problem that made the initial correction necessary. They rarely attack the disjunction between practice and rhetoric that is the source of the dysfunction itself. Not only do they fail to achieve this more fundamental form of organizational learning ("double-loop" learning), they actually resist it, developing a variety of "organizational defences" to which Argyris has given such names as skilled incompetence, defensive reasoning and routines, fancy footwork, and organizational malaise. Many of these arise for highly understandable reasons, such as the desire to avoid embarrassment, threat, or hurting someone's feelings. The result is a high level of dishonesty and dissembling in organizations that prevents

them from bringing what they do into line with what they say — prevents them, in short, from becoming more effective organizations.

In order to bridge this gulf and to promote organizational learning, Argyris has developed a variety of techniques that are all variations on action learning, that is to say they take real-life problems as the raw material for learning, they alternate moments of reflection and analysis with periods of action, and they aim at learning not for its own sake alone but in order to produce concrete consequences from the learning achieved. These various techniques cannot be discussed in detail here, but they include:

- The writing of “cases” in which managers describe not only a real and current business problem but also the dialogue that might occur if they were to address the problem with one of the key actors. On the same sheet on which this dialogue is written, participants make marginal annotations indicating the real but unexpressed feelings or ideas the writer would have during the conversation but would *not* communicate. Such cases can be used as a tool for opening up a genuine, open dialogue in an organization. They can also be rewritten as part of the program to redesign actions, roles, and exchanges.
- The developing of “action maps” around specific issues or problems to illustrate how organizations currently deal with issues and how they trap themselves in organizational defences.
- Development of organizational strategies in programs where emphasis on overcoming organizational defences is mixed with emphasis on strategy itself. Cases such as those described above are examined, and implementation alternates with reflection.

The head of the organization may assume that he or she encourages open discussion but, in reality, may send unconscious signals of a quite different nature.

Another important feature of the techniques designed by Argyris to overcome organizational defences is the potential contribution of a capable external facilitator or resource person. As pointed out in section A of part 3 above, one of the major obstacles to genuine learning in many organizations is the organizational culture itself. The head of the organization may assume that he or she encourages open discussion but, in reality, may send unconscious signals of a quite different nature. Other members of the organization may be equally unwilling to practice or encourage openness, either for reasons of self-interest (promotions, turf, etc.) or because of a genuine wish not to give offence. The result is that organizations are frequently unable to share information honestly, and thus cannot learn or grow.

At its deepest, organizational learning is a means for organizations to know themselves better, more honestly, in the same way that individuals strive to do in the pursuit of wisdom and wholeness.

As pointed out in section A, an external resource person invited to participate in internal discussions and meetings can help to remedy this problem. Where someone's view is being overlooked or given short shrift, where a participant is holding back unnecessarily, where body language or other signals are discouraging open discussion, where the leader's intentions are being misread or misrepresented, perhaps even by the leader, the facilitator or resource person can intervene to draw things out into the open, to invite the participants to pause and reflect on the dynamic of the discussion, to clarify misunderstandings, and generally to promote learning by encouraging open and constructive dialogue. In order to play this role effectively, the resource person obviously must enjoy a high level of authority and credibility with all or most participants, especially the leader.

The specific techniques employed by Argyris to promote organizational learning and effectiveness are perhaps less important here than the underlying insight that what often blocks the path to higher organizational performance is a series of dishonesties and defensive patterns that have been built right into the nature of the organization itself and are maintained unconsciously by all participants. At its deepest, organizational learning is a means for organizations to know themselves better, more honestly, in the same way that individuals strive to do in the pursuit of wisdom and wholeness.

Organizational learning is ultimately about truth and honesty, about making your actions fit your words, and vice versa, so that it may be possible to bridge the gap between promise and performance. Some of the action learning techniques described in this section may help toward this end, and may be augmented with the parallel learning structures described in the following section.

Organizational Learning as Organizational Self-Knowledge: Action Learning

Questions for Managers

1. Would your organization benefit from an action learning program to address issues of organizational performance and adaptation?
2. If so, should such a program aim to improve cross-organizational communication, analysis and awareness by involving managers from various groups and divisions within the organization? Or should it aim to strengthen the performance of an individual business unit (or units) by involving all the members of an intact group or team?
3. Would both action learning models be helpful to your organization?
4. Does your organization need to go beyond immediate performance problems and challenges to grapple with the deeper, underlying obstacles? Does it need to move from “single-loop” to “double-loop” learning? Does it need to overcome common “organizational defences” to achieve higher levels of openness and self-understanding?

Suggestions for Managers

1. Although there are differing views on his/her role, the expert resource person or “set advisor” in an action learning program can be very important. You will want to obtain good advice on the design, duration and focus of your program, as well as guidance in its execution.
2. You might consider using the technique of case studies and dialogues to open up a franker discussion within your organization. After describing one of the most important problems your organization is facing, write down in a left-hand column the dialogue you might typically have with one of the key persons in your organization concerned with this problem. In the right-hand column write down the thoughts you might have in the course of the conversation but would not normally express. When completed, you may want to share this case study and dialogue with your management team as a way of

opening up a more honest discussion about the problem and about the organization.

3. If you pursue the deeper or “double-loop” version of action learning, you may want to involve an appropriate external resource person in the regular work of your management team to assist in overcoming organizational defences (including your own), curbing games-playing, and encouraging candour.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Chris Argyris, *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

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In at least one sense, the outer edge to which an organization can go in the pursuit of organizational learning and organizational self-knowledge is the establishment of a parallel learning structure.

F. Organizational Learning as Organizational Self-Knowledge: Parallel Learning Structures

In at least one sense, the outer edge to which an organization can go in the pursuit of organizational learning and organizational self-knowledge is the establishment of a parallel learning structure. A parallel learning structure is a process or initiative which is, by definition, outside and parallel to the normal, hierarchical, decision-making structure of the organization. A parallel learning structure cuts across the horizontal and vertical divisions of an organization to open up channels of communication, feedback, dialogue, enquiry, openness and participation which, for some reason, cannot be provided by the formal organization.

When an organization decides to establish a parallel learning structure it has committed itself to achieving a level of organizational learning and self-knowledge that apparently cannot be achieved through the normal procedures and structures. The reasons for doing so are as many and varied as organizations themselves. G.R. Bushe and A.B. Shani, the authors of a book on parallel learning structures, identify typical situations that might call for the creation of a parallel learning structure:

- Organizations bogged down by hierarchy may wish to open channels of communication.
- Organizations with ill-defined problems or problems that cut across several units in the organization may wish to address problems the formal organizational structure cannot handle.
- Organizations may wish to solve complex problems resulting from conflicting objectives and needs.
- Organizations may wish to promote system transformation and organizational change, or the implementation of complex, organization-wide innovations.
- Unionized organizations may wish to improve labour-management relations or develop jointly sponsored change projects.

Edgar Schein argues that parallel learning structures make an essential contribution to organizational learning by reducing the various anxieties that are the main barriers to learning: they create psychological

The life cycle of a parallel learning structure may be anywhere from several months up to several years.

safety through temporary parallel systems, supportive groups in which to develop new norms that favour learning.

The life cycle of a parallel learning structure may be anywhere from several months up to several years. A parallel learning structure is usually led by a steering committee selected and given a mandate by the most senior authority in the organization, either the executive head or the senior management committee. The steering committee should be representative of all the relevant divisions and constituencies in the organization. In some cases, it is composed of the top leaders from all these groups; in others, it may be desirable to reflect all levels of personnel.

Bushe and Shani have identified eight phases for a generic model of a parallel learning structure, including initial problem definition and appointment of the steering committee:

Phase 1: Initial definition of purpose and scope

Phase 2: Formation of a steering committee

2.1: Re-examining the need for change

2.2: Creating a vision statement

2.3: Defining boundaries, strategies, expectations and rewards

Phase 3: Communicating to organization's members

Phase 4: Formation and development of study groups

4.1: Selecting and developing internal facilitators

4.2: Selecting study group members

4.3: Study group development

4.4: Establishing working procedures and norms

Phase 5: The inquiry process

Phase 6: Identifying potential changes

Phase 7: Experimental implementation of proposed changes

Phase 8: System-wide diffusion and evaluation

In this model, the role and work of the study groups is a critical phase. The study groups break down vertical and horizontal divisions in the organization, they remove hierarchy, they develop a true "learning" orientation for the process with a respect for openness, creativity, and dialogue, and a desire to bring the "tacit knowledge" already held in the organization into the light of day.

In order for this phase of the process to work successfully, the role of skilled facilitators may be crucial. As noted in sections A and E of this third part of the report, organizations develop a rich variety of “organizational defences,” some of them for very good reasons, such as the desire to avoid embarrassment or avoid giving offence. One of the key objectives of organizational learning is to overcome these defences. A skilled facilitator may be asked to intervene in the process not only from a substantive point of view but in order to overcome organizational defences by ensuring that the proper “learning” atmosphere prevails, encouraging participation and frankness, derailing any games-playing or intimidation that may occur, and generally keeping participants’ attention focused on the “learning” spirit of the exercise.

As in the case of individuals, there cannot be true learning without mistakes, and organizations must learn to make room for the errors or failures that are the price of genuine learning.

Precisely because it is a *learning* process, the use of parallel learning structures should be regarded as experimental. This means, as Bushe and Shani point out, that all decisions, mechanisms, processes, commitments and outcomes are open for modification based on trial-and-error learning. Thus organizations that want to experiment with parallel learning structures have to be prepared to allow them to operate without premature pressure for reliable results. As in the case of individuals, there cannot be true learning without mistakes, and organizations must learn to make room for the errors or failures that are the price of genuine learning.

It is a price that is worth paying. For where true organizational learning occurs it can generate common understandings and insights, a sense of integration and of common purpose that is a powerful source of energy and creative enthusiasm, a source of joy and fulfilment that gives meaning to work, and links individual meaning to the purpose and goals of organizations.

Organizational Learning as Organizational Self-Knowledge: Parallel Learning Structures

Questions for Managers

1. Are you facing a major challenge of organizational change, a complex problem of organizational performance, or an elusive malaise that the formal decision-making processes and structures do not seem able to handle or resolve?
2. Are the horizontal or vertical divisions in your organization preventing good communication, cooperation and alignment in your organization?
3. Do you require some fundamental rethinking of the business, mandate or strategic goals of your organization? Do you want to mobilize the best brains and creative energies of your organization for this rethinking, without the constraint of current assumptions or functional divisions?
4. Is your organization hobbled by problems of communication and cooperation between labour and management?

Suggestions for Managers

1. If the answer to any of the preceding questions is “yes,” you may want to consider experimenting with some version of a parallel learning structure.
2. You may want to study the experience of the Deputy’s Council for Change at Indian and Northern Affairs, one public service experiment with a parallel learning structure.
3. Be very clear with yourself and with others that the primary purpose of a parallel learning structure is to “learn” and do not put premature pressure on it for “results” or for operational performance.
4. Be sure to invest enough time at the outset in defining the problem, issue or challenge the parallel learning structure is to address. Time will also be required to develop common understandings.

5. Give careful thought to the composition of the steering committee: it should have some senior managers to give it clout but resist swamping it and losing credibility. Are the various divisions and levels in the organization sufficiently represented? Make sure the members of the organization are fully involved and feel they own the process.
6. You may want to launch the process with a “retreat” away from the office where a lengthy and untrammelled brainstorming is possible.
7. Consider the skills and tools the steering committee and study groups may require to do their work properly. A good facilitator may be important, but remember that facilitators can play a variety of roles from discussion leader to observer/commentator.
8. Consider your own role in the process. It may vary over time. You may want to hold back in the early stages but participate more actively as the process moves toward conclusions.
9. Do not forget the importance of the implementation phase. The learning structure should not lead implementation but some revised form or spin-off might do so.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Gervase R. Bushe and A.B. Shani, *Parallel Learning Structures: Increasing Innovation in Bureaucracies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

Gervase R. Bushe and A.B. Shani, “Parallel Learning Structure Interventions in Bureaucratic Organizations,” in R.W. Woodman and W.A. Pasmore, eds., *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, vol. 4 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAL Press, 1990), p. 167-194.

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4. Conclusion: Truth or Consequences in Organizations

The essence of continuous and organizational learning is the pursuit and cultivation of truth in organizations.

The essence of continuous and organizational learning is the pursuit and cultivation of truth in organizations. One thing the research on organizational learning appears to reveal is that organizations that falter often do so because they have lost their grasp on reality, the reality of the external world or of the internal organization itself, or of both. They have failed to develop the structures, habits, attitudes and values of learning and of honesty. They have allowed themselves to become insulated and distanced from these realities through ignorance, through oversight, and through the elaborate "organizational defences" that make it so difficult for ideas and perceptions to circulate freely, openly and creatively. Organizational learning is about overcoming these defences and developing higher levels of perception, awareness, and honesty. Organizational learning is the pursuit of organizational wisdom and self-knowledge.

Because the essence of organizational learning is the pursuit and cultivation of truth in organizations, it must start with the individual. It must start with a culture of continuous learning, a culture in which individuals are encouraged by all possible means to participate in a continuous process of learning and growth. This is so for at least two reasons. First, as we have already observed, organizations do not know, or learn things. Organizations do not have minds, only individuals do. Only individuals can know or learn, and make that learning available to the organization.

The second reason is that all true learning depends on give and take, question and answer, dialogue, or what the philosophers call dialectic. The world is not given to us, it is revealed to us through a process of testing and exchange: exchange with the material world that only reveals itself to us in answer to our questions, and only in so far as our questions are adequately formulated; exchange with ourselves, and with our fellow human beings. The structure of thought or learning is a structure of dialogue, a dialogue that begins in the individual human mind. Unless this internal dialogue is sufficiently vigorous, sufficiently well nourished and informed, and pursued relentlessly, the individual mind will have little of value to offer the world.

The dialogue of learning continues in that outer world, including the world of organizations. Here the same requirement holds true. Unless the dialogue is sufficiently lively and pursued relentlessly, with frankness and candour, the group or organization will be unlikely to achieve the insight, understanding, coherence, or self-knowledge necessary to add value to the world.

Continuous learning must begin then with the individual. Organizations have a decided self-interest in encouraging the development of authentic, learning, growing and self-knowing individuals because only such individuals will be equipped and able to lead or participate in the kind of energetic dialogue from which true organizational learning springs. Peter Senge calls this building-block of the learning organization the pursuit of “personal mastery.” But this is just a fancy way of saying that organizational learning begins with individual learning: it depends on developing the strong, self-aware, well-informed and insightful individuals who will be able to engage in the unrelenting dialogue and exchange on which organizational learning depends.

Individual learning is essential, but it is not enough. It is the necessary but insufficient condition for organizational learning.

Individual learning is essential, but it is not enough. It is, as Argyris and Schon argue, the necessary but insufficient condition for organizational learning. An organization may be staffed by authentic, well-informed, capable, self-knowing and self-developing individuals. But unless it takes steps to allow individual insights and perceptions to blossom outward into a greater whole, no true organizational learning may emerge. The natural course of organizations, unless led consciously onto the learning path, is to descend into the valley of fancy footwork and organizational defences. Thus a culture of continuous learning in organizations requires both sides of the equation, both individual and organizational learning.

The essence of both is the pursuit and cultivation of truth. Individuals must be honest with themselves, but so must organizations. Individuals must pursue relentlessly the internal dialogue that leads to self-discovery and discovery of the external world. But so must organizations. They must find the means to foster the honest exchange and dialogue through which truth may emerge: truth about the organization, about its vision, about the external world, and about the fit between the two.

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