

---

## **Some Thoughts on Turning a Government Organization into a Learning Organization**

**Eton Lawrence<sup>1</sup>**

Research Directorate  
Policy Research and Communications Branch  
Public Service Commission

**DRAFT - 1998**

---

<sup>1</sup>The views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Public Service Commission.

---

---

## Why Learning Organizations?

As new demographics, new technologies, and new global structures become the order of the day, the very nature of work, organizations, and management is undergoing fundamental change. In this new hyper-competitive environment learning becomes the central focus as the human resource becomes the only resource around which a sustainable competitive or strategic advantage can be built. Managers need to learn ways of organizing that are less hierarchical, more democratic, and focussed upon skill and knowledge development.

***“The challenge for leaders in the twenty-first century will be how to release the brainpower of their organizations” (Bennis, 1997).***

***“The dominant competitive weapon of the twenty-first century will be the education and skills of the workforce” (Thurow, 1997).***

Hamel and Prahalad (Prahalad, 1997) emphasize that learning and competence will be the fundamental building blocks in the creation of a strategic architecture that links the past and the present and that competitive advantage will go to those organizations that succeed in building new competencies in new opportunity areas.

***“Companies will have to unlearn their past and forget it! The future will not be an extrapolation of the past” (Prahalad, 1997).***

Similar sentiments were echoed by Jocelyne Bourgon, Clerk of the Privy Council, in her Fifth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on The Public Service of Canada (1998). In describing the areas of the Public Service that require further improvement she said, *“In human resources management, the goal is to become a learning and knowledge-based organization, one able to provide to provide people with the breadth of knowledge and experience necessary to advise and serve in a modern global environment.”*

However, while it is widely recognized and accepted in both the private and public sectors that this trend may be inevitable, the real challenge is how to actually transform an organization into a learning organization. As one writer puts it, *“The chorus asking this question is growing. People in . . . public and private sector organizations are . . . seeking the Holy Grail of learning organizations to improve their operations and their results”* (Willard, 1995). In fact, *“The public sector has changed more in the last three years than in the last 30 to 50, and the rate of change seems to be accelerating. Agencies are asking how to bring about dramatic process improvements, organization culture shifts and agency overhauls”* (Van Wart, 1994). This paper addresses some of the steps that might be taken in order to transform a government organization into a learning organization.

---

## What is a Learning Organization?

The concept of the learning organization was spawned several years ago but gained prominence with Senge's first book, *The Fifth Discipline - The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* (1990). In general terms, a learning organization can be described as “*one that seeks to create its own future; that assumes learning is an ongoing and creative process for its members; and that develops, adapts and transforms itself in response to the needs and aspirations of people, both inside and outside itself*” (Navran Associates, 1993). David Garvin describes a learning organization as “*an organization that is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights*” (David Garvin, Harvard Business School, 1993).

Peter Senge describes a learning organization as one that is structured in a manner consistent with the essences of human nature. Senge stresses the importance of the higher human essences, and argues that learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Furthermore, he opines that real learning is not restricted to understanding what is necessary to merely survive, “*adaptive learning*” but also includes “*generative learning.*” This he defines as learning that expands a human being's capacity to create the results he or she truly desires (Senge, 1990).

While many organizations deal with change by simply adapting, and while adaptation is a form of learning, it is mainly reactive. If an organization is to survive its learning must be more deliberative, reflective, and anticipatory. The difference between an adaptive and a learning organization is subtle, yet profound.

***“Both types [adaptive and generative] operate in the present. But the adaptive organization is slightly behind; it is just arriving from the past. The learning is slightly ahead; it is just leaving for the future”*** (Meyers and Hood, 1994).

Senge separates significant organizational learning into five types which he refers to as “disciplines.” The first is ***Personal Mastery*** which encompasses education, training, and development but also includes how we bring that knowledge to our organization and use that creativity to keep us and our organizations responsive to changing environmental circumstances. The second is the ***Mental Models*** – the way people cognitively and socially construct reality – we use for analyzing our organizations, our adversaries, and ourselves. The third type of learning involves the creation of a ***Shared Vision***. This provides the basis for common concern and commitment so necessary for generating the focus and energy for learning. The fourth is ***Team Learning*** which is about alignment, harmonization of individual efforts, and commonality of direction. The fifth discipline is ***Systems Thinking*** which, according to him, is what makes all other types of learning work in harmony. A fundamental problem for business organizations is the failure to see problems as elements of systems failures. This problem in government is even more serious because public policy problems by virtue of their very “publicness” tend to be complex with diverse interconnected elements and interests.

---

When tied together, this means that managers must “*understand and accept reality*” (i.e., have accurate mental models), “*accept a different orientation*” which is more team-oriented, understand “*that most of an organization’s problems are not unique errors but systems issues,*” discern the “*shortfall between the organization’s present reality and its future possibilities*” through a “*shared vision,*” and “*involve and empower people throughout the organization*” by building on personal mastery (Senge, 1990).

Argyris and Schon (1978) define significant learning in organizations as the ability to detect and correct errors. They distinguish between *single-loop* and *double-loop* learning. Single-loop learning produces behaviour changes that are adaptive but do not produce significant value changes. This is the kind of learning that enables a person to cope with a particular situation without taking any steps towards resolving the underlying causes. Thus, this type of learning addresses only the symptoms and not the problem. By contrast, double-loop learning produces value changes from which flow behavioural changes. This is learning that questions and explores the underlying causes of a problem and seeks to find lasting solutions. Their thesis is that single-loop learning, apart from perpetuating the *status quo*, produces *skilled incompetence*, that double-loop learning can be taught to individuals, and can replace single-loop learning in entire organizations. In order for this to occur, however, the following conditions have to be present: strong motivation on the part of targeted recipients, substantial amounts of time (two to five years for major changes), and excellent concrete learning interventions. The similarity between Senge’s approach and this one is evident.

It must be stressed that learning organizations do not just happen. Their creation requires conscious interventions to capture, store, disseminate, and use learning at the systems level to create innovative products and services. Since engaging an entire system, particularly a large one, in learning is a monumental task, the pure learning organization exist more as an idealistic construct than as a real phenomenon. “The learning organization is more of a journey than a destination. Each step along the way often holds unpredictable consequences that require reevaluation and readjustments” (Marsick, 1997). However, some organizations are well on their way to becoming learning organizations.

### **Traits commonly found in a Learning Organization**

The following are some characteristics commonly found in learning organizations:

#### **Encourages**

- ▶ Creative activities involving problem finding, problem solving, and solution implementation. Traditional organizations are generally concerned with problem solving. This encourages Type III error which can be defined as the probability of solving the wrong problem when one should solve the right problem
- ▶ Diverse viewpoints and continuous questioning and inquiry
- ▶ Substantive conflict and discourages affective conflict

- 
- ▶ Taking responsibility for mistakes and not blaming others
  - ▶ Experimentation, innovation, and risk taking
  - ▶ Employee empowerment
  - ▶ Competitive learning

**Discourages**

- ▶ Hostile power struggles
- ▶ Affective conflict

In short, individuals in an ideal learning organization will think critically and creatively, considering all the factors involved in understanding a situation, and will be sensitive to each other's points of view. They will communicate ideas and concepts both in inquiry and action by first establishing trust.

**Barriers to Learning**

The following are some generic thoughts on barriers to becoming a learning organization and solutions for overcoming these:

***Individual barriers***

- X The unconscious assumption that “I know all I need to know”
- X Discomfort at having to give up cherished opinions or beliefs
- X Fear of becoming temporarily incompetent until a new skill is learned
- X Unlearning what has worked in the past but is no longer effective
- X The feeling of being too busy
- X Sheer mental laziness

***Organizational barriers***

- X Management decisions that are not to be questioned
- X Inability or failure to understand barriers
- X A blaming rather than trusting culture
- X An environment where questioning and/or challenging are not encouraged, or worse, actively discouraged
- X A “knowledge is power” syndrome that blocks the sharing of learning
- X The famous “Not Invented Here” syndrome
- X Management behaviour that says “our subordinates have to learn, but not us”
- X Organizational silos that impede cross-functional co-operation
- X Lack of training time, materials and resources
- X Satisfaction with the status-quo

- 
- X Punishing mistakes rather than treating them as necessary learning experiences
  - X Failure to encourage innovation
  - X Lack of recognition for improving capabilities and contributions
  - X Lack of standardization mechanisms to capture and spread improvements as they are developed
  - X Lack of knowledge transfer or cross-fertilisation mechanisms

### **Overcoming the Barriers**

The following are some suggestions for overcoming the barriers cited earlier:

#### ***Organization***

- ✓ Steering committees that prioritize and lead change
- ✓ Central "teaching" organization to develop and deliver training materials
- ✓ Network of trainers or teachers – often specialized in various subjects
- ✓ Strong R&D organization to lead innovation
- ✓ Network of generic subject matter experts to support cross-fertilization
- ✓ Employee suggestion scheme organized for fast feedback, high acceptance rate and frequent recognition

#### ***Conditions***

- ✓ Management learn faster and better when also required to teach in training cascades
- ✓ Teams are more effective than individuals in problem solving and improvement projects
- ✓ Short cycle times provide more cycles of learning in a given time period, accelerating the experience curve
- ✓ Lack of time and mental laziness are real issues
- ✓ Cross-fertilisation within and among organizations must be actively supported
- ✓ Periodically new methods, procedures, know-how etc. have to be standardized, to provide a stable platform for another round of learning
- ✓ Innovation must be actively encouraged, and successful ideas recognised and rewarded

#### ***Managerial Climate***

- 
- ✓ Leaders with a global orientation, the ability and willingness to accommodate and guide rapid change
  - ✓ Encouragement of experimentation and intelligent risk-taking
  - ✓ Drive for continuous improvement
  - ✓ Fact-based decision making premised on a clear mandate and vision
  - ✓ Openness to new ideas and paradigms
  - ✓ Active promotion of innovation

## How a Government Organization Might Become a Learning Organization

### The Need

Kanter, Stein, and Jick (1993) in describing US government organizations, said:

*... it is a "sad fact . . . that, almost universally organizations change as little as they must, rather than as much as they should. If this has a ring of truth for private sector organizations, it should have a deafening clang for public sector organizations whose pride formally has been stability and caution. Public sector organizations even those whose missions are seemingly over, certainly die far less frequently than their perishable private sector counterparts. Yet clearly the rules are shifting for the public sector as the nation becomes more serious about a \$4 trillion deficit, run-away sectors such as health care, corrections, and social security, and cost containment in both government revenues and expenditures."*

### The Theory

Defining precisely the kinds of activities that are necessary for the creation of a learning organization is an important step towards becoming a learning organization. Boydel (Boydel, Pedlar & Burgoyne, 1991) describes three ways that companies learn: implementational learning, improvement learning, and integrational learning. However, he provides no clues as to the relative importance of these three types of learning and how to achieve balance using this approach. Marquardt and Reynolds (1994) provide the following **13 Steps for Building an Organization's Learning Capacity:**

1. Transform the individual and organizational image of learning
2. Create knowledge-based partnerships
3. Develop and expand team learning activities
4. Change the role of managers
5. Encourage experiment and risk-taking
6. Create structures, systems, and time to extract learning

- 
- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. Build opportunities and mechanisms to disseminate learning</li><li>8. Empower people</li><li>9. Push information throughout the organization and to external associates</li><li>10. Develop the discipline of systems thinking</li><li>11. Create a culture of continuous improvement</li><li>12. Develop a powerful vision for organizational excellence and individual fulfilment</li><li>13. Root out bureaucracy</li></ol> |
|---|

### Putting Theory into Practice

While the theory and underlying logic behind learning organizations are well developed, hardwiring the learning is much more problematic, as not much exists by way of practical guidelines for traditional organizations wishing to make the transition to learning organizations. Comprehensive methodologies have only recently started to emerge (Redding) and must stand up to scrutiny and the test of time. Moreover, there is no standard formula as what may be effective for one organization may not be effective for another. The transition is, therefore, mainly one of trial and error, retaining those practices which are effective, and discarding and forgetting those which are not. For example, care must be taken in what Marsick refers to as “*sculpting*” a systems-level learning infrastructure because “*systems learning looks different because of variations in industry and organizational culture; the stage of development of the business; the degree to which work is routine or non-routine; who holds the knowledge for the organization, and whether it is tacit or explicit; and whether expertise is stored in people who continually exercise judgment or in standard systems and processes*” (Marsick, 1997).

While these broad theoretical guidelines are useful at the conceptual level, they are of limited value in enabling an organization to go from theory to practice of building a learning organization. According to Dolan, “*the theory of the learning organization is useful in raising questions but has limited practical applications*” (1995). Adding to this difficulty is the fact that documented examples of public sector organizations that have become learning organizations are very rare. An exhaustive search by the author has, to date, turned up only a handful of such organizations. The one that will be used in this paper to illustrate the transformation process is English Nature, the British government's adviser on nature and conservation. This organization was able to make significant strides towards becoming a learning organization by using a “**Six Step Approach**” formulated around the 13 principles mentioned earlier (Marquardt and Reynolds, 1994). An examination of their model may inform on some of the initiatives that government organizations can do to embark on the journey to becoming a learning organization.

|                  |
|------------------|
| <b>Step One:</b> |
|------------------|

|  |
|--|
| Get the support of relevant senior staff, especially for changes related to the wider issues of organizational management. |
|--|



---

This requirement will be discussed extensively relative to the other five, because of its importance in the transformation process and the fact that the others tend to flow from it. In other words, if this is not in place, the change effort will be doomed from the start.

Senior managers can act as role models for the rest of the organization. *“This role modelling should cover an open, available, supportive, and visible management style, where mistakes can be admitted to. They will also need to be involved in learning reviews, networking, and working in a non-bureaucratic way”* (Dolan, 1995).

But not only is senior management support an issue here, so is leadership quality, and style. Learning organizations require leaders who can influence the processes and structures that encourage double-loop learning. Learning is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving competitive or strategic advantage. Like competencies, and diversity, learning must be goal-driven rather process-driven and tied to the larger corporate strategic objectives. It must also be part of a well-integrated building a learning organization strategy. Therefore, without proper guidance at the most senior levels, it is conceivable that inappropriate or irrelevant learning might take place (Locke, 1997).

In this transformation the importance of the role of leadership cannot be overemphasised. A number of very significant changes will have to occur for a government organization to become a learning organization. Major adjustments will have to take place in the attitude, role, and orientation of leaders and managers. *“Tomorrow's manager will need to understand business at a far more global and synergistic level than ever before, and to feel comfortable leading people who have learned to manage themselves”* (Gibson, 1997).

According to Hamel, *“If you want to create a point of view about the future, if you want to create a meaningful strategy, you have to create in your company a hierarchy of imagination. And that means giving a disproportionate share of voice to the people who have until now been disenfranchised from the strategy making process. It means giving a disproportionate share of voice to the young people. It means giving a disproportionate share of voice to the geographic periphery of your organization - because, typically, the farther away you are from headquarters, the more creative people are: they don't have the dead hand of bureaucracy and orthodoxy on them. And it means giving a disproportionate share of voice to newcomers”* (1997). The essence of leadership will be the senior executive's ability to distinguish between what they are still able to contribute and recognising what they need to learn from others. A recent example of the operationalizing of this requirement can be found in the Employment Equity Act (1996) which enables the learning organization by creating a diverse workforce with its accompanying synergy, innovative thinking, and diverse viewpoints.

According to Senge, our leaders need to be thinking seriously about how they think, because if we approach the future with traditional mindsets, the future will leave us stuck in the present. According to Senge, the “command and control” organization is the antithesis of the learning organization as it stifles imagination and intelligence. *“The trouble is that most business*

---

*relationships work like dysfunctional families. Everybody is just basically concentrating on just pleasing the boss and avoiding getting their ass kicked, rather on building real relationships.”* However, such forms of top-down control-dominated organizations cannot cope with the new business environment. Therefore, *“we have massive institutional breakdown and massive failure of the central nervous system of hierarchical institutions in the face of growing interdependence and accelerating change”* (Senge, 1997).

The manager's challenge in these changing times is to find creative ways to capitalize on change. Empowerment and innovation lie at the heart of this effort. Empowerment means equipping all staff to make decisions that will lead to the desired results. Innovation involves encouraging staff to continuously improve products and services and/or reduce costs. Empowerment and innovation also often imply reducing control. It is recognized that the *“concepts of control and accountability are essential tools. If we don't hold on to them, empowerment could turn to anarchy and innovation to chaos. But these concepts need to be broadened. Accountability needs to include not only reports on results achieved by an organization but also plans for meeting its mission and managing its resources. Similarly, control should include a means of creating conditions that lead to achieving objectives. This will involve getting rid of unnecessary controls and ensuring that those remaining are as unobtrusive as possible”* (Meyers and Hood, 1994).

Put another way, *“The professional manager has to spend so much of his or her life measuring and controlling, and that is what the business schools teach us, quite properly; but experience goes on to teach us that what we cannot measure and control can prove to be as important as what we can”* (Parker, 1994).

#### **Step Two:**

Introduce systems of work that bring action, review, and application of learning so closely together that their boundaries become hard to distinguish.

For example, facilitation training is provided to help group leaders tap into the expertise of employees in order to solve problems and promote action.

#### **Step Three:**

Introduce working practices that enable staff to network freely, move between jobs, as required, and have ready access to senior staff.

Encouragement and support are given to small teams formed to explore new ways of dealing with current problems. Often these teams comprise individuals from diverse backgrounds who would not normally get together. This helps to break down hierarchical barriers and foster better working relationships with outsiders. It also gives people the confidence to learn from each other.

#### **Step Four:**

---

Get senior staff to network outside of the organization and report back on a regular basis.

These activities enable an organization to stay in touch with and make more significant contributions to the community, while promoting the development of allies for the future.

**Step Five:**

Support as much learning as possible so that staff develop the learning habit and learn to question the existing systems.

Training would be an integral part of this exercise and should be used in creative ways (McCrombie, 1996). For example, English Nature reviewed its rules on funding private study and decided that managers should encourage and fund training and skills development for any interested employees, even if such training had no immediate relevance to their jobs. Their goal is to develop a habit of learning and they recognize that they cannot predict the skills that may be required in the future. This is referred to by Snow and Snell (1993) as building in "slack" to enable an organization to respond quickly to new opportunities or unexpected changes in its strategic direction. It must be emphasized, however, that training solutions cannot by themselves bring about the learning organization. Such initiatives must be part of a larger well-integrated building a learning organization strategy that is linked to clearly delineated corporate strategic objectives.

**Step Six:**

Introduce new ways of learning so that a wide range of learning opportunities and options are available to meet individual needs and preferences.

For example, English Nature set up a learning centre that will be updated and promoted on an ongoing basis. This centre provides a wide array of learning materials that allow employees to learn in ways and at times that they find convenient. In addition, the organization continues to offer a "dating service" to encourage mentoring and coaching and to encourage employees to take a broader view of learning.

In general, it is necessary to co-operate with partners and colleagues in other organizations by holding joint events, sharing resources, and swapping ideas.

**Conclusion**

Ours is a time of rapid and accelerating change. To stay relevant and effective during such times, an organization must change at least as fast as its environment changes. To be innovative, the organization must change even faster and it must anticipate the future. This means it must become a "*Learning Organization.*"

There is no quick-fix in this endeavour and organizations must customize their approaches using certain principles as guidelines. Not only is there a need for radical organizational transformation

---

and new management paradigms in the private sector. This requirement is very much a part of the new realities of the public sector. However, there are not many examples of public sector learning organizations, which in itself, may be indicative a deeper dilemma. This is not to say that efforts are not being made in this direction by public sector organizations. In fact within the Public Service of Canada, for example, there are notable recent initiatives in this direction. These include the adoption of system-wide, value-driven change such as staffing reform, recruitment reform, information-technology infrastructure, universal classification system, etc. However, although these are significant steps in the right direction, the greater part of the journey still lies ahead of most public sector organizations.

A developing a learning organization strategy, in the government, must emphasize assessment of its present status, proper validation tools for measuring progress, and be an integrative system that is linked to a clear corporate strategy objectives.

---

## References

- Argyris, C., and Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Bennis, W. (1993) *An invented life: Reflections on leadership and change*. Reading MN: Addison Wesley.
- Bennis, W. (1997) writing in Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) *Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.
- Blumfield, M. Putting the learning organization to work, *Training*, June 1997.
- Bourgon, Jocelyne (1998). *Fifth Annual Report to The Prime Minister on The Public Service of Canada*.
- Boydell, T., Pedlar, M. Burgoyne, J. (1991) *The Learning Company*, McGraw-Hill .
- DiBella, Anthony, J. Gearing up to become a learning organization, *Journal for quality and participation*, June 1997.
- Dolan, Steve. A different use of natural resources, *People Management*, October 1995 .
- Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) *Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.
- Gravin, D. (1993), "Building a Learning Organization", *Harvard Business Review*.
- Hamel, G. (1997) in Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) *Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.
- Kanter, R. M., Stein, Barry, and Jick, Todd (1993). *The Challenge of Organizational Change*, New York: Free Press.
- Locke, E. A., "Organizational Learning?" in Church, A. A. (1997) "Responding to questions on learning organizations, *From Both Side Now: Organizational Learning*."
- Marquardt. M., and Reynolds, A. *The Global Learning Organization*, Irwin, 1994.
- Marsick, V. (1997), in Church, A. A. (1997) "Responding to questions on learning organizations, *From Both Side Now: Organizational Learning*."
- McCrombie, K. (1996), *A New Federal Government Learning Strategy prepared*, Public Service

---

of Canada Report.

Meyers Larry, D., and Hood, Jamie, Harmonizing Control and Accountability With Empowerment and Innovation, *International Journal of Government Auditing*, January 1994.

Navran Associates Newsletter, "The Learning Organization: What Is It? Why Become One?", October, 1993.

Parker, Sir Peter, The Shape of Leaders to Come, *Management Today*, July 1994.

Prahalad, CK (1997) writing in Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

Redding, John. (1997). Hardwiring the learning organization, *Training and Development*, August 1997.

Senge, P. (1990) *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Senge, P. (1997). "Through the Eye of the Needle" in Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

Snow, Charles, C. and Snell, Scott, A. Staffing as Strategy, in Schmitt, N., Borman, W. C., and Associates, *Personnel Selection in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993.

Starkey, Ken (1998) What can we learn from learning organizations? *Human Relations*, April 1998.

Sullivan, B., (1997). In Action: Creating the learning organization, *Personnel Psychology*, Summer 1997.

Thurow, Lester (1997) writing in Gibson, Rowan ed. (1997) Rethinking the future: business, principles, competition, control, leadership, markets and the world, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

Van Wart, Montgomery, Learning and the reinvention of Public Sector Organizations, *public Administration Review*, Vol. 54, No. 6, Nov/Dec 1994.

Willard, Bob (1995). "Three Strategies For Learning Organizations", IBM Canada Ltd.