



**Healthcare Rx: Are You a Learning Organization?**  
**By Marty Jacobs**  
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The term “learning organization” has been with us ever since Peter Senge published his groundbreaking book *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990. So what exactly is a learning organization? Learning organizations are those that are able to integrate the following five disciplines as defined by Senge:

- **Personal mastery:** the ability to continually clarify and deepen personal vision, focus energies, develop patience, and see reality objectively.
- **Mental models:** deeply ingrained assumptions or generalizations that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.
- **Building shared vision:** building and holding a shared picture of the future and developing the capacity to meet that vision.
- **Team learning:** engaging in dialogue and the process of thinking and learning together.
- **Systems thinking:** the study of system structure and behavior that focuses on the interrelationships of organizational systems and examines the whole rather than the individual parts.

Characteristics of learning organizations include the following:

- An organizational vision is created through input from all key areas and is endorsed by all employees, not mandated from on high.
- The organization focuses on analyzing patterns over time rather than taking snapshots.
- In their on-going communications, employees balance advocacy with inquiry, that is, they argue for their point of view as much as they invite others to question this point of view and as much as they ask questions about others’ points of view.
- When unintended outcomes happen, learning organizations focus their efforts on understanding how the system structure enabled that outcome rather than blaming an individual or group of individuals.

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- Learning organizations are forward looking, always focused on the desired future they want to create, rather than looking back to what went wrong and trying to fix it.
- Learning organizations encourage employee's to stretch and try out new ideas.

So what does it take to become a learning organization? There is no easy recipe, and the process is often messy. It might begin with the organization creating a shared vision, one that all parts have a hand in shaping. Or an organization might start at the team level, helping teams develop the skills of true dialogue that lead to team learning. Another option might be to examine the underlying assumptions about how work gets done that might be hindering progress. ("But we've always done it that way!") In short, the process is as individual as the organization. There is no right or wrong way, and there is no end to it. It is the essence of continuous learning, and it becomes part of the organization's culture.

Is your organization a learning organization? Here are some key questions to ask:

- Does your organization make time for reflection?
- Does your organization take time to explore all possible options rather than settling on the first solution that seems to work?
- Does your organization recognize patterns of behavior that are creating less than desired outcomes?
- Does your organization examine and question on a regular basis its assumptions about how work gets done?
- Does your organization engage in dialogue that builds shared meaning?
- Does your organization explore the nature of conflict, rather than suppress it?
- Is your organizational environment safe, open, and trusting?
- Does your organization encourage risk-taking and view failures as opportunities to learn?

If you can answer "yes" to the majority of these questions, then you are well on your way to becoming a learning organization. Over the next series of articles, I will examine the following key areas for becoming a learning organization: 1) creating a safe environment, 2) developing a shared vision, 3) challenging assumptions, 4) encouraging dialogue, and 5) engaging in systems thinking. If you have specific examples from your own organization or past organizations that you would like to see addressed in these subsequent articles, please send them along to [marty@systemsinsync.com](mailto:marty@systemsinsync.com).

Resources:

*The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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