



Learning Organizations: Fad or Future?

By Marty Jacobs

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When Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline* was first published in 1990, the term "learning organization" joined the business lexicon. Senge was able to distill years of research and practice in the field of organization development into a clear and concise theory for creating profound organizational change. So, are learning organizations the wave of the future or will the theory fall by the wayside like so many other business and management fads (management by objectives, reengineering, etc.)? The answer to that question is a resounding, "It depends." It depends on an organization's willingness to commit the time and energy to changing its behavior.

Before delving into the area of changing organizational behavior, however, let's first define a learning organization. Learning organizations are those that are able to integrate the following five disciplines:

- **Personal mastery:** Personal mastery is the ability to continually clarify and deepen personal vision, focus energies, develop patience, and see reality objectively.
- **Mental models:** Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions or generalizations that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. Working with mental models involves surfacing and examining organizational assumptions, in order to understand organizational systems better and to develop more effective solutions.
- **Building shared vision:** This discipline entails building and holding a shared picture of the future and developing the capacity to meet that vision.
- **Team learning:** Team learning involves engaging in dialogue and the process of thinking and learning together.
- **Systems thinking:** Systems thinking, what Senge refers to as the "fifth discipline," is the cornerstone of organizational learning that ties the other four disciplines together. In a nutshell, systems thinking is the study of system structure and behavior. It focuses on the interrelationships of organizational systems, looking at the whole rather than the individual parts.

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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.
- 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. My next article will be the first of five devoted to each of the five disciplines.

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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