

**A Training Manual for Training of  
Trainers on Organizational Learning and the  
Learning Organization**

**Volume 4**  
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**August, 2018**

**Melkassa, Ethiopia**



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# Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization

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The importance of learning is linked to the current pressure for change facing most, if not all, organizations. Within a stable, not pressured environment, the need for organizational learning on a major scale is seen as unnecessary. In fact, stable environments rarely exist, just environments that are *perceived* as unthreatening, where organizations fail to detect the small signs of emerging change and react to them confidently in terms of established ways of doing things.

The concept of managing learning implies that organizations encourage their staff to be better at recognizing key signals: at analyzing data, of its members, or whether it is simply a sum of the component parts. Organizations are an essential part of the way our society operates. They can be found at all levels of society and are involved in the bulk of the transactions in which we engage with other people.

Organizations are, however, much more than means of providing goods and services. They create the settings in which most of us spend our lives. In this respect, they have profound influence on our behavior. Because of their importance to our everyday lives, the study of behavior within organizations has become a discipline in its own right, concerning:

The study of human behavior, attitudes and performance within an organizational setting; drawing on theory, methods and principles from such disciplines as psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology to learn about individual perceptions, values, learning capacities and action while working in groups and within the total organization, analyzing the external environment's effect on the organization and its human resources, missions, objectives and strategies (Gibson, Ivancevich, and Donnelly, 1988)

Life within one organization may be similar to life in another, but it will also be different. Each organization is unique. This uniqueness emanates from each organization's culture, which grows and changes during the life of the organization. It is influenced by its original and developing purpose, the people in the membership and those with influence on the organization.

Therefore, if each organization is unique and has its own identity manifested in its culture, which develops and changes over time as a result of experience and influence, the organization must be capable of learning. Learning, as defined earlier, is a purposeful activity aimed at the acquisition and development of skills and knowledge and their application. An organization's skills are found in its accepted behavior patterns and its collective knowledge in its shared assumptions. The organizational attitude exists in the core values. If these can be developed within an individual, there is no reason why this cannot happen for an organization. It is more difficult and will take longer to achieve, but these factors do not reduce the possibility of organizational learning.

A learning organization is one that:

- Seeks to create its own future
- Assumes learning is an ongoing and creative process for its members
- Develops, adapts and transforms itself in response to the needs and aspirations of people, both inside and outside itself
- Allows people at all levels, individually and collectively, to continually increase their capacity to produce results they really care about
- Has a climate in which individual members are encouraged to learn and to develop their full potential?
- Extends this learning culture to include customers, suppliers and other significant stakeholders
- Makes human resource development strategy central to organizational policy
- Is in a continuous process of organizational transformation.

The purpose of this process of transformation, as a central activity, is to enable the organization to search within and without for new ideas, new problems and new opportunities for learning, to improve its performance in an increasingly competitive world.

Why should organizations care? Because the level of performance and improvement needed today requires learning, lots of learning. At the heart of a learning organization lies the belief that enormous human potential lies locked and undeveloped in our organizations. Central to this belief is the conviction that when all members of an organization fully develop and exercise their essential human capacities, the resulting congruence between personal and organizational visions, goals, and objectives will release this potential. Being a member of a learning organization is not necessarily an easy role. In fact it can be distinctly uncomfortable, depending on the individual's view of the world. To those who are excited by learning and development, who actively seek change and growth, the notion of continuous learning is very attractive – the prospect of being involved in a learning organization is desirable. To others, the opposite may be true. The idea of change and challenge can be frightening to those who prefer continuity and routine.

There is a belief among those who are committed to learning and development that this will be beneficial to all. This is not a correct assumption. Some people are content to go to work and do the same job, day in, day out, for the whole of their working lives. They have as much right to take this view as those who believe differently. However, their wish for stability must not lead to stagnation, for stagnation brings death, ignites wake. As with people, some organizations prefer stability in their culture and work actively to preserve the status quo. The existence of 'dynamic conservatism' must not be ignored.

## **The Shape of a Learning Organization**

It is not possible to construct a diagram of a learning organization. There is no predetermined structure that can be laid out on a page.

Neither is there a flow chart of systems and processes, which can act as a formula for other organizations to replicate. Learning organizations are not like that. It may be easier to draw a picture of a learning organization than to show its structure. A picture can communicate feel as well as give form to an organism, for a learning organization is more than doing; it is being. It is important that managers who want to develop such an organization appreciate that they need to believe. To become a learning organization, an organization must be more than one with a policy. Commitment and beliefs only become real when they are translated into the actions and approaches taken by the organization's managers and others with leadership or power roles. These people need to base their actions on the belief that people throughout the organization have the right to be treated in a developmental way.

A total organization can be a learning organization. Alternatively, it is possible for a small section of a larger organization to become a learning organization, even though the rest of the wider organization would not meet the conditions. This is because the actions and approaches taken by individual managers can foster and nurture a developmental climate. Equally, they can inhibit one. Even in an organization striving to be learning organization, an individual manager can sabotage the intent by the attitudes adopted and actions taken towards other staff. Being a developmental manager requires determination, commitment, effort and belief. Being a contra-developmental manager is easy. You expect nothing, give nothing and get nothing.

## **Being a Learning Organization**

A learning organization is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself (Pedler, et al., 1991). Learning happens at two levels: i) the individual level, where individuals learn through training, development processes or working experience, and ii) the organizational level, which is determined by the attribute that might encourage learning in a collective or systemic way,

innovation, and change. To achieve the conversion of individual learning into organizational learning, certain essential factors need to be in place such as structure, systems and a climate where vertical and horizontal communications are strong, teamwork results in working routines that support innovation and knowledge creation.

Senge (1990) found that organizational learning could be i) adaptive or single-loop learning, which is concerned with learning to cope and respond, and ii) generative or double-loop learning, which refers to new ways of looking at the world. In this respect Argyris (1990) stresses that “the single-loop refers to learning or adjustment that follows the recognition of an error”. ... Single-loop learning does not solve the more basic problem of why these problems existed in the first place” – very probably due to politics, fear, deference and attitudes towards authority. Double-loop learning calls for a higher level of learning, questioning why errors happened and problems occurred. Triple-loop learning involves questioning established mindsets and a deeper sort of analysis about what the organization does and why it does it; about the constraints themselves; about the need to change values, assumptions, and ways of thinking. In an organization where double- and triple-loop learning is achieved, performance is enhanced: i) by increasing its efficiency as it cuts errors (doing things right), and ii) by strategically devoting itself to do what it is supposed to do the way it is supposed to be done, thus increasing its effectiveness (doing the right things). The challenge is to create a synergy by relating learning at the individual and organizational levels.

## **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization**

Becoming a learning organization is difficult to achieve mainly due to mental models and mindsets that limit the possibilities that we are prepared to consider (Senge, 1990, 1994). These mindsets perpetuate traditional conceptions of organizations, such as conventional structure, culture and systems. Organizations may be systemically bad at a type of learning that is fundamental to their success in contemporary markets and environments. As Argyris and Schön

(1978) explain, “organizations tend to create learning systems that inhibit double- loop learning that calls into question their norms, objectives and basic policies” – they learn not to learn. Double-loop learning requires unlearning – requires the removal of obstructive working routines, processes and habits. The staff of an organization perceive ‘reality’ through the systems of representation and meaning they use, e.g. categories, assumptions, convictions, and ways of thinking and understanding, which are pervasive within an organization and decisively structure what reality is, and what we think it means.

Jones and Hendry (1992) developed a five-development phase model with the objective of creating the synergy necessary to become a learning organization, by relating learning at the individual and organizational levels:

- 1) **Foundation** – Here the responsibility of the organization is to ensure that the ‘basic survival skills’ are acquired by developing human resource development strategies to motivate learning.
- 2) **Formation** – Here the organization is to make available opportunities and resources for training and development of individuals as the learner makes demands for new learning.
- 3) **Continuation** –Human resource development systems need to be sensitive to the differential pace of learning of individuals both on and off the job (Kolb).
- 4) **Transformation** – concerns a complete change in the structures, systems and culture of the organization to respond to changes in society, technology, economy, environment, and politics. It aims to achieve this: By actively implementing HRM strategies that value diversity, promote creativity, teamwork, communications. By developing strategies that actively support community initiatives. By ensuring that the social and ethical dimensions underpin all organizational activity, with an emphasis on corporate responsibility, and learning focuses on management people change and self-assessment.
- 5) **Transfiguration** – during this phase the organization will be concerned with the transformation plus the elevation leading to

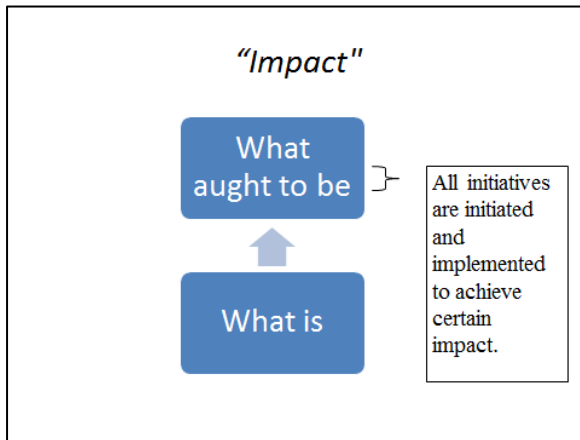


idealization: people coming first and a concern for society's general welfare and betterment; asking questions about why the organization exists in the forms that it does; representing a way of life to be cherished because of its values; and developing to accommodate and understand global cultures, tolerance, integration, and cooperation.

## Learning Organization

### Power points slides

The objective of every organization or project is to achieve impact. The intention is to change “WHAT IS” to “WHAT AUGHT TO BE”.



Some of the issues that were identified that block this change were the following:



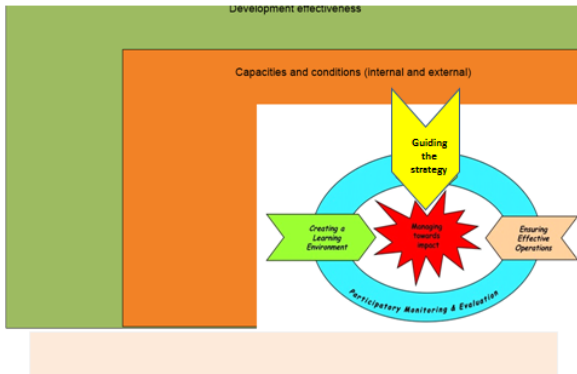
### Group discussion

- Based on your experience what are the things that are barriers to achieving impact in organizations?
  - Reflect individually and then discuss in pair.

### Context: Some current barriers to realizing impact

- Weak situation analysis
- Inadequate participation, ownership and empowerment of those involved
- Insufficient Human Resources
- Inflexibility during implementation
- Ineffective partnerships
- Non-enabling policy & institutional environment

## Managing for Impact (M4I)



### Five pillars of M4I

1. Guiding the strategy
2. Effective operations
3. Monitoring and evaluation
4. Learning orientation
5. Supporting capacities & conditions

## Five pillars of M4I

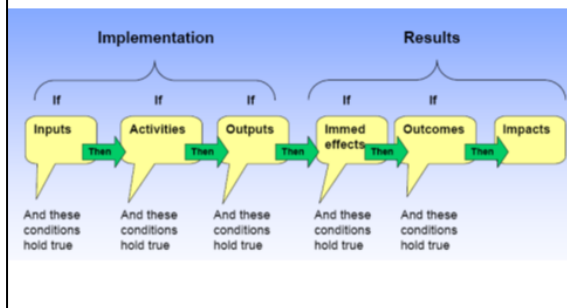
1. Guiding the strategy
2. Effective operations
3. Monitoring and evaluation
4. Learning orientation
5. Supporting capacities & conditions

### 1. Guiding the strategy towards impact

- Strategic design based on in-depth understanding of the situation and well articulated program
- Strategic thinking
  - Where are we now, where do we want to be and how can we get there whilst keeping an eye on the context?
  - Improving strategies based on learning and feedback



## 1. Being clear about the theory of change



## 2. Ensuring Effective Operations

- **Covering core operations:**
  - staffing, taking care of equipment, goods and office buildings, managing contracts, financial tracking and audits, and more.
  - the annual work plan and budget is to reflect all these and more basic management procedures.
  - a clear guiding manual that gives clear responsibility to all workers
- **Establishing procedures for feedback on operations**
- **Managing information & communication**

### 3. Monitoring and Evaluation

- ✓ Is one pillar that helps to improve performance and achieve impact
- ✓ Is a management tool
- ✓ Overlooked
  - The delusion of learning from experience
    - we never experience the consequences of some of the most important decisions

### Why M&E



Source: inProgress

## Experience from day to day life

*let us make M&E simple*

- What do you do with your per diem?
- How do you follow up with your child's education ?

## 4. Creating a learning environment

Working effectively with the "people" processes:

- Creating spaces for analysing and critically reflecting on experiences;
- Ensuring that the views of all workers is listened to and heard;
- Enabling meaningful participation; and
- Providing incentives and removing the disincentives for constructive criticism & critical reflection.



### **A Learning Organization is:**

**an organization that facilitates  
the learning of all its members and  
continuously transforms itself**

**(Pedler, Boydell, and Burgoyne (1991))**

### **Why the interest about organizational learning ?**

Organizations increasingly face pressures  
to:

- rejuvenate,
- change and learn to assure themselves of:
  - short term high performance, and
  - long-term survival
- To show impact of their engagement

**Concepts of organizational learning offer  
useful strategies and actions in promoting  
organizational adaptation.**



**No short cut for good result!**

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**(Pedler, Boydell, and Burgoyne (1991))**

## **A Learning organization (Con't)**

“Learning organizations [are] organizations;

- where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire,
- where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured,
- where collective aspiration is set free, and
- where people are continually learning to see the whole together”

(Senge 1990: 3)

## **In the Learning Organization**

**Learning is:**

**A purposeful activity aimed at the acquisition and development of skills and knowledge, and their application**

## **Characteristics of Learning organizations**

- Provide continuous learning opportunities;
- Use learning to reach their goals;
- Link individual performance with organizational performance;
- Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal;
- Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks;
- Are continuously aware of and interact with their environment;
- Develops, adapts, and transforms itself in response to the needs and aspirations of people, both inside and outside itself (Kerka 1995)

## **In the Learning Organization**

**Learning occurs at two levels:**

- 1. Individual level,**
  - where individuals learn through training, or working experience
- 2. Organizational level, by the attribute that encourages learning in a collective or systemic way, innovation, and change**

## **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization**

- Why is it rare to see organizations learning from their experiences and improving?
- Why are we not seeing organizations adapting to changing conditions as expected?
- What is avoiding individual capacities from being transferred into organizational capacities?
- Why is organizations finding it difficult to create a learning environment?

## **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization**

The main difficulties are:

**'...mental models and mindsets that limit the possibilities that we are prepared to consider'**

**(Senge, 1990, 1994)**

## Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization

### ***Unlearning:***

the removal of obstructive;

- working routines,
- processes, and
- habits

that inhibit reflection on organizational norms, objectives, and basic policies

## Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization (con't)

- (Organisational) defensive patterns, e.g. skilled incompetence
  - Manipulating & using skilfully explanation to hide weaknesses
- Information disorders,
  - eg structural information disorders (info blocked or distorted because of hierarchy, specialisation or centralisation) or Power differences

### **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization**

“I am my position”

- people see their responsibilities limited to the boundaries of their position
- “The enemy is out there”
  - the outside world is to blame for things going wrong

### **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization**

The fixation on events (lacking systems thinking)

- creative learning cannot be sustained in an organisation if people's thinking is dominated by short-term events

### **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization ( con't)**

- “The parable of the boiled frog”
  - gradual processes (which can have big consequences) are often not recognised:
    - e.g. If employees leave org. gradually, management may not sense the problem but if 10 employees apply for resignation management will immediately react and try to investigate the cause

### **Difficulties in Becoming a Learning Organization ( con't)**

- **The delusion of learning from experience;**
  - we never experience the consequences of some of the most important decisions
    - The influence of working with farmers ( participatory extension ) or having good feedback mechanism
  - In some situations cause & effect relationships are not easily observed
    - e.g It is difficult to ascertain the effect of giving feedback to employees



## **Ten steps to a learning organization**

### **1. Assessing learning culture**

- Difficult to change until their is willingness, at least, on the part of decision makers to know the truth what every one thinks.
  - Know what every one thinks
  - Start taking responsibly for what you think and what you do.

### **2. Promote the positive**

- Changing the attitude to learn to think positively

## **Ten steps to a learning organization (con't)**

### **3. Making the work place safe for thinking**

- Providing continual permission and incentives for every one to think well and benefit from the thinking of others.

### **4. Reward risk taking**

- Innovators should be encouraged & protected by their team;
  - management should give them permission to take the anticipated risk,
  - developing or helping them have access to skills required.

## **Ten steps to a learning organization (con't)**

### **5. Help people become resources for each other**

- first necessity is getting to know people better

### **6. Put learning power to work**

- In a survival situation you need to use all your intelligence and sensory inputs to stay alive

## **Ten steps to a learning organization (con't)**

### **7. Map out the vision**

- A shared vision integrates the contribution of everyone into new, much richer possibility than any individual or small group could have achieved.

### **8. Bring the vision to life**

- To make vision work in actual world you have to have means of translating words that express goals and ideals into actual ways of doing things.

## **Ten steps to a learning organization (con't)**

### **9. Connect the systems**

- For better or worse anything that happens in an organization is a result of many cause and effect interacting among themselves
- Every organization operates under very specific conditions. This specificity must be grasped and evaluated to determine the nature of the system and how they could work better.

## **Ten steps to a learning organization (con't)**

### **10. Get the show on the road**

- Internalize and express it through the particular forms of actions chosen to direct each individual's talent and energy

*( Based on Kline and Saundes1993)*



**No short cut for good result!**

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