Chapter 7

The Learning Organization

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ABSTRACT

The practice of using reviews of past events as (often expensive) investments in learning for the future pays off. Why don’t all organizations use the practice as a matter of course? The chapter explores how barriers are similar to all other barriers to successful knowledge management and include such obvious elements as high level ownership and a culture of valuing the learning every employee can contribute to the organization’s future. A key element is the organizational will to learn from what happened in the past. The After Action Review is used to illustrate a model for organizational learning.

WHAT IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

The concept of a learning organization was first put forward by Peter Senge (1990). In his original formulation, he explained it in terms of five “disciplines” (Senge, 2006):

1. **Systems Thinking:** Thinking about the whole rather than the individual parts.
2. **Personal Mastery:** Self development or individual learning.
3. **Managing Mental Models:** Understanding how organizations change or learn.
4. **Building a Shared Vision:** Creating a common sense of purpose.
5. **Team Learning:** Creating new forms of shared learning or knowledge.

Senge’s pairing of systems thinking with team learning, the “fifth discipline,” created the framework for seeing interrelationships and patterns of change rather than individual things (Senge, 2006).

Senge clearly intended for the learning organization to be an action-oriented concept, not simply a theoretical one. He relied heavily on practical problem solving, drawing from his own background in engineering. He also borrowed selectively from cognitive learning...
Theories, going back to the action research work of Kurt Lewin (1999) and scholarship on group learning.

Senge has been criticized by Caldwell and others for failing to develop sufficient linkage between learning and organizations. Although conjoining these terms presented an exciting opportunity for systems thinkers to explore how organizations could learn collectively, Senge did not develop this theoretical space. Similarly, his detractors criticize his waver- ing identification of leadership. In his early writings, he supports the leadership structure of typical hierarchical organization. In his later writings, individuals or learning groups are given more agency and are thought to be able to facilitate change within their organizations. Caldwell in addition criticizes Senge’s inability to develop an action-oriented model to complement his theoretical concept (Caldwell, 2012).

In spite of the incomplete development of the idea, the concept of a learning organization has persisted in the business and management literature.

In my experience, it is more effective to define a learning organization based on its behaviors rather than to use a theoretical definition. A learning organization:

- Learns from its experiences and its members.
- Seeks out opportunities to learn.
- Values learning by individuals and by the organization.
- Rewards learning and teaching others.

**CAPTURING LESSONS**

American soldiers serving in Iraq from 2006 to 2008 offer a good example of organizational learning as a way to gain competitive advantage over enemy forces. Soldiers serving in the desert, a new operational area for American troops, established a community of practice to connect themselves to fellow soldiers. Through this community, they exchanged information about how to prevent their weapons from being damaged by sand and how to un-jam weapons with sand in them. Over time, forums became collections of helpful equipment repair information, practical tips on the usefulness of weapons and gear in desert and urban combat situations, strategies for spotting and identifying improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and other actionable information. The Soldier Knowledge Base, a grassroots knowledge management effort, quickly became one of the most successful KM initiatives in the military. As new units deployed to the desert, the troops could learn from the experiences of units deployed earlier rather than repeating the same experiences themselves.

Many organizations see learning as a competitive advantage and value it implicitly on its own. For this reason, we often see the language of learning, education, or training used even when teaching or learning may not be occurring.

There is a long tradition in the military of reviewing the actions of a battle in order to better understand the strategies and tactics of enemy forces and to improve tactical performance in future battles. For quite some time, the tradition was accomplished through battle reports written by unit commanders. In recent decades, however, there has been increasing recognition that participation of all unit members in after action reviews is valuable for obtaining the most comprehensive understanding of the battle actions.

Military leaders have understood for a long time that battle simulations and practice exercises improve unit performance during real combat situations. However, the actual cause and effect are unknown. Is it a case
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