Learning Organizations

Based on Peter Senge et.al. The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, 1994, pp.9-59
Why Bother?

Why build a learning organization? Why commit ourselves to a lifelong attempt to understand and shift the ways we think and behave?

- Because we want superior performance
- To improve quality
- For Clients
- For competitive advantage
- For energized, committed workforce

- To manage change
- For the truth
- Because time demands it
- Because we recognize our interdependence
- Because we want it
Attributes of “winning” organizations in the 21st century

- Replacing bureaucracy with aspirations, values and visions
- Systematic understanding
- Conversations
- Voluntary follower ship
Paradigm Shift In Learning

- From individual to collective
- From local to global audience

- From just-in-case to just-in-time and just-enough learning
- From scheduled restricted time period modules to anywhere/anytime training modules
Thinking Strategically About Building A Learning Organization

- The essence of the learning organization
- The architecture of learning organizations
- The integrity of the architecture
- Putting it all together
The essence of the learning organization

DOMAIN OF ENDURING CHANGE (deep learning cycle)

- Attitudes and Beliefs
- Awareness and Sensibilities
- Skills and Capabilities
The Deep Learning cycle is the essence of a learning organization

• Not just the development of new capacities, but of fundamental shifts of mind, individually and collectively.

• The five basic learning disciplines – systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, share vision and team learning activates this deep learning cycle.

• Sustained commitment to the disciplines keep the cycle going.

• When the cycle begins to operate, the resulting changes are significant and enduring.
New Skills and Capabilities

- **Aspirations**: To orient themselves towards what they really care about; and to change because they want to, not just because they need to.

- **Reflection and Conversation**: The capacity to reflect on deep assumptions and patterns of behaviour both individually and collectively.

- **Conceptualization**: The capacity to see larger systems and forces at play; constructing coherent descriptions of the whole

We can do things we couldn’t do before!
New Awareness and Sensibilities

• Ability to “see” underlying structures driving behaviour.

• Increasingly aware of the ways in which we continually construct our views of the world.

• “Listening to the whole”, hearing not only what is said, but the deeper meanings
New Attitudes and Beliefs

- New awarenesses are gradually assimilated into basic shifts in attitudes and beliefs.
- It takes time.
- When it does, it represents change at the deepest level in an organization culture.

- The set of beliefs and assumptions that develops over time in a learning organization is so different from the traditional hierarchical, authoritarian organizational world view.
The architecture of learning organizations

Guiding Ideas

DOMAIN OF ACTION
(organizational architecture)

Innovations in infrastructure

Theory, Methods, and Tools
“Good ideas drive out bad ideas.”

Can be developed and articulately deliberately – long been a central function of genuine leadership.

Starts with vision, values and purpose – what the organization stands for and what its members seek to create.

Distinguishing features of powerful guiding ideas – *philosophical depth* and *seeing the process as on-going*
Three Key Guiding Ideas for Learning Organizations

• The primacy of the whole: Relationships are in a general sense, more fundamental than things, and that wholes are primordial to parts. “Dividing a cow in half does not make two small cows.”

• The community nature of self: To see the inter-relatedness that exist in us. “There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.”

• The generative power of language: Shows the subtle interdependency operating whenever we interact with “reality” and implies a radical shift in how we see some of the changes coming about. “When we measure the world we change it.”
Theory, Methods and Tools

• Enhance the capabilities that characterize the learning organizations: aspirations, reflection, conversation and conceptualization.

• Basic connections between theory, method and tools underlie each of the five learning disciplines.
Innovations in infrastructure

- Infrastructure: resources - time, management support, money, information, ready contact with colleagues, etc. to support people in their work.
- Will enable people to develop capabilities like systems thinking and collective inquiry within the context of their jobs.
The integrity of the architecture

- Leaders intent on developing learning organizations must focus on all three of the architectural design elements. Without all three, the triangle collapses.
- Without guiding ideas, there is no passion, no overarching sense of direction or purpose.
- Without theory, methods and tools, people cannot develop the new skills and capabilities required for deeper learning.
- Without innovations in infrastructure, inspiring ideas and powerful tools lack credibility because people have neither the opportunity nor resources to pursue their visions or apply the tools.
Putting it all together

DOMAIN OF ACTION
(organizational architecture)

Guiding Ideas

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Attitudes and Beliefs

Awareness and Sensibilities

Skills and Capabilities

DOMIAN OF ENDURING CHANGE
(deep learning cycle)
• The *triangle* or organizational architecture represents the most tangible form of efforts – the key focus for *activity*.

• The *circle* represents the more subtle underlying discipline-based learning cycle – the central causality of *change*.

• While we focused on the triangle, we are mindful of the circle.
• Ultimately, learning is judged by results.
• The problem is knowing how and when to measure important results.

• There are two interrelated issues: *patience* and *quantification*. 
Patience

• Deeper learning often does not produce tangible evidence for a considerable time. “You don’t pull up the radishes to see how they are growing.”

• Time periods for measurement must be congruent with the gestation period of the learning.

• Measurements that are prematurely will lead to erroneous conclusions.
• Measure quantitatively that which should be quantified; measure qualitatively that which should not be quantified.

• There will be some important quantifiable results.
• But, many of the most important results of organizational learning are not quantifiable: intelligence, openness, innovativeness, high moral quality, courage, confidence, genuine caring.
The Implicate Order: where everything is folded into everything

• The Western word “measure” and the Sanskrit “maya” appear to derive from the same origins.

• Yet, in the West, the concept of measure has come to mean “comparison to some fixed external unit,” while maya means “illusion.”

The immeasurable is the primary reality!
Core Concepts About Learning in Organizations

• At its essence, every organization is a product of how its members think and act.
• The primary leverage for any organizational learning effort lies in ourselves.

• The emphasis is on thinking and interacting means shifting the orientation from outward to inward.
• Means a continuous testing of experience and transformation of that experience into knowledge – accessible to the whole organization, and relevant to its core purpose.
Checklist for the learning process

• Do you continuously test your experiences? Are you willing to examine and challenge your sacred cows? Do you “shoot the messenger”?

• Are you producing knowledge, i.e., capacity for effective action? Does your organization show capabilities it didn’t have before?

• Is the learning relevant? Is the learning aimed at the organization’s core purpose? Can people make use of it?

• Is the knowledge shared? Is it accessible to all of the organization’s members?
Learning is on-going; mastery of the way of self-improvement

The English word originated with the Indo-European *leis*, meaning "track" or "furrow". To learn means gaining experience by following a track – presumably for a lifetime.
Defining Your Learning Organization

STEP 1: “If I had a Learning Organization ...” Imagine that you are working in the learning organization you would like to build. Answer these questions:

1. What policies, events or aspects of behaviour in this new organization help it thrive and succeed?
2. How do people behave inside the organization? How do they interact with the outside world?
3. What are some of the differences between this ideal organization and the organization for which you work now?

Be specific. Express the examples, images, possibilities and details that cross your mind.
Defining Your Learning Organization (cont’d)

• **Step 2: Enhancing the Definition** You might like to know how others envision the learning organization. Take any definitions from the following list that fit your image.

  a) *People feel they are doing something that matters*
  b) *Everyone is stretching, growing or enhancing their capacity to create.*
  c) *People are more intelligent together than they are apart.*
  d) *The organization become more aware of its knowledge base.*
  e) *Vision of the direction of the organization emerges from all levels.*
  f) *Staff are invited to learn what is going on at every level of the organization.*
  g) *People feel free to inquire about each others’ (and their own) assumptions and biases.*
  h) *People treat each other as colleagues.*
  i) *People feel free to take risks.*

Between the list and your own, you may end up with a long list. Make sure that you have at least five. Number each of them so you can refer to them easily in the next step.
Defining Your Learning Organization (cont’d)

- **Step 3:** “What would it bring me … ?” One by one consider each of the choices from Step 2. If my organization had these new features, what will happen as a result? What would it bring the organization? What would it bring you personally?

- **Step 4:** Picking and refining the top five Based on Step 3, choose the five characteristics that are most compelling to you and your organization. Do not worry about which seem plausible or easy to achieve. Try to include at least one or two elements that prompt you to think, “It feels right, but we could never do that here.”

- **Step 5:** “What stands in our way?” What would you have to do to achieve each of these components of your vision? What barriers and obstacles would have to be overcome?

- **Step 6:** “I’ll know we’re making progress if … “ Now consider each of the five primary goals and each of the obstacles identified. Name one or more “indicators” for each set. An indicator will signal you that some progress had been made.

- **This exercise performed by members of a team can lead into the “Designing the Learning Organization” exercise.**
“What Do We Want to Create?”

- Talk through the following sets of questions. Spend time only with the questions which are meaningful to your team.
- **STEP 1: The Vision of the Future** It is 5 years from now and you have created the learning organization you most wanted to create. As a team describe it – as if you were able to see it, realistically around you. Make sure that each member of the team has an opportunity to comment on each of the questions.

1. **Who are the stakeholder? How do we work with them? How do we produce value for them?**
2. **What are the most influential tends in our “industry”?**
3. **What is our image? How do we compete?**
4. **What is our unique contribution? What is the impact of our work?**
5. **How do we make money?**
6. **What does our organization look like?**
7. **How do we handle good times and bad times?**
8. **In what ways is our organization a great place to work in?**
9. **What are our values? How do people treat each other? How are people recognized?**
10. **How do we know that the future of our organization is secure? What have we done to ensure its future for ourselves? What have we done to ensure its future for our grandchildren?**
11. **What is our organization’s role in the community?**

After each of these questions, ask: “How would we measure our progress?”
“What Do We Want to Create?”
(cont’d)

• **STEP 2: Current Reality** Now come back to the current year, and look at your organization as it is today.

12. What are the critical forces in our systems?
13. Who are the current stakeholders – inside and outside? What changes do we perceive taking place among our stakeholders?
14. What are the most influential trends in our “industry” today?”
15. What aspects of our organization empower people? What aspects disempower people?
16. How is the strategic plan currently used?
17. What major losses do we fear?
18. What do we know (that we need to know)? What don’t we know (that we need to know)?
Designing a Learning Organization: First Steps

- **STEP 1: Establishing the groups** For a group with two types of participants: (1) people who seem to believe in improving the organization and (2) people, who because of their position, will invariably be involved first in any organizational learning effort.
  - Divide the group into two; equal in size. Section A will operate as people who present an image of what a learning organization could be; Section B will maintain a grasp of current reality.
  - Divide Section A and Section B into working teams, each with 5 to 6 people, representing different parts of the organization.

- **STEP 2: Divergent Thinking** For 45 minutes or more, each team should deliberate on the following set of questions and write the answers on a flip chart.
  - **Section A**
    1. What would we have, that we don’t have now, if we had a learning organization?
    2. What action might we take to achieve those visions? What policies and practices would be worthwhile?
  - **Section B**
    1. What are the present barriers and obstacles to becoming a learning organization?
    2. What would we want to change or eliminate?
    3. What elements of the organization already support learning?
Designing a Learning Organization: First Steps (cont’d)

- **STEP 3: Clarity** Still in the same teams, consolidate the ideas from Step 2 into 10 or 12 coherent points. Number each point. Points might for e.g., resemble the following:
  1. What we would have a learning organization (Section A)
  2. A better system for disseminating financial and client-survey information throughout the organization
  3. Allowing personal mastery programme for every interested staff
  4. Barriers to a learning organization (Section B)
     1. The time delays in communications between departments
     2. Bringing in a new “guru” without showing how their messages fits with the message of the last guru.

- **STEP 4: Convergent Thinking** Still in working teams, winnow your list down to 3 items. Some can be eliminated immediately. Others will be defended – “her is why I think the action step is particularly important.” Give everyone an opportunity to explain their reasoning and to challenge the reasoning by others.

- **STEP 5: Presentations and Priorities** Each A team presents its top 3 suggestions for what to create. Each B team presents the 3 most significant barriers or constraints. In larger groups (members more than 25), teams first present to their own sections separately, and then to the common plenary. In smaller groups (25 or less), the A and B teams present to the common plenary. You need not reach consensus, where everyone agrees. Make sure that everyone feels they have been heard and understood.

- **Step 6: Implementation** Assign task forces for each of the chosen projects. The task forces will attempt an action, note the results, learn and report back to the larger group.
Moving Towards a Learning Organization

- Staying on the Cutting Edge
- Optimizing knowledge management
- Teams focus on collective learning
- Commitment to learning and continuous improvement.