

# **A Primer on the Learning Organization**

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## INTRODUCTION

The learning organization is a complex topic. The issue, moreover, is controversial; the debate is still very much alive. There is no body of final knowledge – no established truths, no universally accepted principles. And yet, the field is fascinating, representing an exciting opportunity for creative exploration in human resources management.

This primer has been written with public service learning professionals in mind and it represents an exercise in selective judgment. It aims to pull out of the literature what you might need or wish to know. Beyond that, it provides a guide to the recent literature in Annex B and provides some supplemental notes in the other annexes.

The research literature contains no simple path to the learning organization. It does not provide the Strategic Roadmap to the Learning Organization. Every organization must figure out its own path. If this primer takes you just a step or two down this path by raising the right questions, it will have achieved its primary objective.

## CONTEXT

The recently published *Policy on Learning, Training and Development* (“the Learning Policy”) empowers deputy heads to become what might be called chief learning officers for their organizations:

Deputy heads have the authority, pursuant to section 12(1) (a) of the *Financial Administration Act*, to “determine the learning, training and development requirements of persons employed in the public service and fix the terms on which the learning, training and development may be carried out,” and Treasury Board has the authority, pursuant to section 11.1(1) (f) to “establish policies or issue directives respecting the exercise of the powers granted by this *Act* to deputy heads.”

Treasury Board in its role as the employer retains the authority to establish policies and issue directives in this domain. In reality, the practical source of the policy and directive was CPSA, the employer’s policy centre for HR, including learning. The key point to remember is that deputy heads have the authority to guide learning within the policy framework established by Treasury Board.

Although the first phase of implementing the Learning Policy has centred on the required training for new employees, functional specialists and managers at all levels, it is crucial to note that the policy addresses other fundamental dimensions of learning:

In addition, [the Policy] introduces measures to **strengthen organizational leadership and promote innovation**. Implementation of this policy will help build a **learning culture** in the Public Service of Canada and stimulate, guide and promote its development as a **learning organization**.

Later, in Section 5 of the Learning Policy, there is another reference to these broader dimensions:

The objective of this policy is to help build a skilled, well-trained and professional workforce; to strengthen **organizational leadership**; and to adopt **leading-edge management practices to encourage innovation and continuous improvements in performance**.

And again, in Section 6, entitled *Policy Requirements*:

**Deputy heads** are responsible for ensuring that:  
measures are taken to strengthen **organizational leadership** and **promote innovation through the adoption of leading-edge management practices**;

The significance of the Learning Policy, then, goes well beyond required training. The policy calls for new approaches to learning. The wording may be general, but the direction is clear. These approaches should look to strengthen both organizational leadership and the capacity to innovate in public sector management. More generally still, they should look to instil a culture of learning and to make departments and agencies learning organizations.

Taken together, these requirements represent one enormously demanding but extremely exciting challenge. If ever there were a time for strategic work in learning, now is the time. The Learning Policy has opened the field for this creative exploration. Like all creative exploration, it is best done by pooling the talents and energies of the likeminded. We will all gain by thinking and talking this through together. Of course there will be a need to engage employees, managers, and deputy heads in the discussion too, but down the road. They will all have their own role to play. For now, however, we need to achieve clarity for ourselves.

#### **Brief Historical Note**

The Learning Policy is itself the product of an evolution in thought about learning. An important turning point was the October 1999 Speech from the Throne. It underscored the need to “focus on the recruitment, retention and continuous learning of a skilled federal workforce.” In 1999 as well, in the report to the prime minister on the public service, the Clerk of the Privy Council called for the public service to become a learning organization. Shortly thereafter, the Clerk established the Learning and Development Committee (LDC). After extensive consultations and research, the LDC produced two key reports to advance learning in the public service, ultimately laying the foundation for the *Policy for Continuous Learning in the Public Service of Canada* adopted in 2002.

This policy aimed at creating a learning culture in the public service. On the practical side, departments and employees were asked to develop learning plans. In addition, departments were asked to develop learning policies and identify performance targets related to learning investments. As of January 1, 2006, this policy was superseded by the Learning Policy, which goes beyond the older policy by clearly spelling out the roles of deputy heads and of the different central agencies in supporting learning. Like its predecessor, the Learning Policy also emphasizes the importance of such core concepts as the learning organization, continuous learning, and the learning culture.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the fall of 2006 the Clerk established a deputy minister committee on public service renewal. Although this committee will adopt a broad approach to public service renewal, a strong people component is their focus and they have established HR planning, recruitment, development and enabling infrastructure as their initial priorities in January 2007. Learning, then, is on the agenda. This is crucial. It is known from the results of the Public Service Employee Survey (2005)

34% of public servants say lack of access to learning has adversely affected their career.

that 34% of public servants say that the lack of access to learning opportunities has adversely affected their career. What is more, over 41% percent claim that lack of access to developmental opportunities had a negative impact on their careers. Approximately one-third say that their supervisor does not help them determine learning needs and does not provide on-the-job coaching or an opportunity to develop and apply their skills.

These figures suggest there is more work to be done. Of course, too, the link to recruitment and retention lends the work certain urgency. Survey results in the public and private sector show

Learning & development: key levers for attracting and retaining talented people

that learning, development, and career progression are key levers in attracting and retaining talented people. Indeed, most experts in the field would agree that much of the battle for talent over the next 10 to 20 years will hinge on creative approaches to learning, professional development and personal growth. As the academic expert and Commissioner of the Public Service, David Zussman has pointed out, the future ability of the federal Public Service “to recruit and retain the best talent available will be diminished if these results are not improved.”

Because of the importance of public service renewal, the Prime Minister recently established an Advisory Committee of eminent Canadians. Co-chaired by Paul Tellier, a former Clerk of the Privy Council, and the Right Honourable Don Mazankowski, the Committee will advise the Prime Minister and the Clerk on the future and renewal of the public service. Its mandate also calls for a report annually that will be annexed to the Clerk’s Annual Report to the Prime Minister. The committee will focus on external recruitment, leadership, human resources management and the management of change.

In sum, the renewal of the public service is attracting attention at the highest levels of the Government of Canada. It is therefore an opportune time to be exploring the creative approaches to learning and development that come with the notion of the learning organization.

## KEY QUESTIONS

It is important to focus the discussion of the learning organization on certain key questions:

- (1) What is the learning organization?
- (2) What is organizational learning?
- (3) How does the learning organization differ from more traditional approaches to learning?
- (4) What type of change is involved in building a learning organization?
- (5) How does one build a learning organization?
- (6) How does one sustain a learning organization?

Now, given the current state of the research (see Annex B for a quick review), any answer we give to these questions is bound to be incomplete. Rather than attempting to arrive at a final answer of our own, an effort will be made here to convey a sense of the different answers that emerge in the recent literature and academic debate. The focus will be on common trends in the different approaches.

Before doing so, it might be useful to examine the history of the concept. Why are we even talking about learning organizations and organizational learning? Why are these ideas thought to be important? If these ideas are responses to real challenges, which challenges are they responding to? What, simply, is driving the discussion?

## DRIVERS

### Competitiveness

As Senge (1990) remarks: "The rate at which organizations learn may become the only sustainable source of competitive advantage." Much of the discussion on learning organizations and organizational learning has focused on private corporations. The general story is simple enough. In an era of globalization, companies that learn and that use this learning to shape new structures, processes, and systems are better able to thrive and prosper. Organizations that cannot adapt face extinction. Organizational adaptability is thus the central driver of the learning organization.

Such competitiveness is crucial to governments too. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman has argued that "in the globalization system...one of the most important and enduring competitive advantages that a country can have today is a lean, effective, efficient and accountable public service". Most experts in the field of government and public administration would agree.

Designing and implementing effective government programs for Canadians requires knowing the current and future needs of citizens, governments, civic associations and businesses. In the age of globalization, maintaining a competitive edge also requires knowing what other governments are doing around the world. Government organizations must be able to gather, analyse, and synthesize vast quantities of information if they are to remain internationally

competitive. But this is only part of the challenge. They also need to be able to learn from this mass of knowledge – to translate it into effective action. The learning organization is thus key to the competitiveness of governments.

## Information Technology

If complex machines drove the productivity of the industrial age, information technology drives the knowledge age. Unlike the relatively stable technologies of the industrial age, however, information technologies are continuously evolving. Cliché though it may be, change has become a constant in organizational life.

Many of the more prominent initiatives in the Government of Canada over the last 20 years have centred on new technologies. One thinks of Government Online and of its associated initiatives. About 130 of the most commonly used government services are now available online. The Canadian government has in many respects led the world in transforming government services, changing the relationship with the citizens it serves. Of course, managing these services from within government requires a high degree of technical skill. The pending introduction of new approaches to shared services, both external and internal, will only increase the need for a workforce that can accommodate change.

The efficient use of information technology requires a workforce that can evolve as technology evolves. This means that learning will become an essential part of what it means to do the job well. Briefly, it has now become part of the work itself, rather than something done to prepare for a job or a career, the traditional view. Learning, continuous learning, organizational learning, and the learning organization itself – all of these concepts are essential to the productive capacity of organizations.

## The Knowledge Worker

Born into a world of constantly evolving technology, rapid change, and the constant creation of new knowledge, the knowledge worker no longer sees learning and work as completely distinct. To the knowledge worker, getting the job done means keeping abreast of developments in their fields, and this requires continuous learning.

As Drucker has remarked, unlike industrial workers, knowledge workers own the means of production: their own brainpower. Their greatest potential limitation is obsolescence. Knowledge workers, therefore, expect and need to learn through work. They are disappointed and ultimately disabled when they cannot learn. Meeting these expectations by building a learning culture is thus essential to maintaining and retaining a productive workforce.

Now, although the knowledge worker is often portrayed as a technical professional, a little reflection on our own case shows that we are all becoming knowledge workers. The value of what we produce depends on what we know; and what we know depends on what we can learn. What we learn, moreover, depends not so much on what we learned at school as on what we can learn on and through the job. The flexible employee is the employee who sees change as an opportunity to learn. The American educator John Dewey captured the idea well: *Learning is not a preparation for life; learning is life.*

## **The Permanence of Change**

Change in the Canadian federal sector has taken many forms over the last 25 years: delaying, devolution, downsizing, program review, relocation, transfer, mergers, privatization, re-engineering of services, the revision of organizational mandate or vision, and legislative and policy renewal, to name a few.

People often speak of “change fatigue” in government. But change is not going to go away: It has become an essential dimension of organizational life. The organizational rate of change is determined by the rate of change outside government. Rather than resisting change, the learning organization is like the flexible employee: it sees change as an opportunity to learn, where learning involves adapting to external change so that the organization is better able to fulfill its purpose. The failure to adapt can be catastrophic: more than half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list in 1993 were no longer there in 2001 (Housel and Bell, 2001). Adapting to change has become a life skill.

As for the public sector, which is often portrayed as quiet and staid, a Statistics Canada report in 2002 found that four-fifths of Canadian public organizations introduced improved organizational structures or management techniques between 1998 and 2000, a rate of organizational change twice that of the private sector. The public sector also led the private sector overall in the introduction of significantly improved technologies (85% versus 44%). Although some of the differences result from the relative size of private and public organizations, the basic fact remains: change is constant in the public sector.

So much for the drivers. We will now take a look at what these ideas mean.



## DEFINITIONS OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

When looking at the literature on learning organizations, it is hard not to recall that famous line from Mark Twain: *“Many researchers have already cast much darkness upon this subject, and it is probable that if they continue, that we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”*

Neither the idea of learning nor the idea of organization is entirely clear. Not surprisingly, we do not achieve much more clarity when we connect these ideas in the “learning organization.” Despite this lack of precision, we can get our feet on the ground and find our way.

Here are a few of the better-known definitions:

Senge	Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create 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 how to learn together.
Pedlar	An organization which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.
Schon	We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are ‘learning systems’, that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.
Watkins & Marsick	Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles.
Jamali, Khoury, & Shayoun (2006)	A type of organization that promotes continual organizational renewal by weaving/embedding a set of core processes that nurture a positive propensity to learn, adapt, and change.

## **DIMENSIONS OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION**

Grouping the definitions together, we can distinguish three core dimensions of the learning organization.

### **Individual Dimension**

At the individual level first of all, learning organizations have both an environment and leadership that facilitate continuous learning among employees. The workplace is in this respect almost a kind of school: employees pursue learning; managers support their learning; and the organization supports managers in supporting employee learning. The learning organization is a place of continuous learning. Learning becomes a conditioned reflex, a habit.

### **Group Dimension**

At the group level, learning organizations look to create a fluid movement of knowledge and experience across the organization. By “knowledge” here we mean not only explicit knowledge – the kind that we can document in some way – but tacit knowledge as well, understood as the stock of work-related experience and judgment that each of us carries around in our heads. Team discussion is based on a form of open dialogue characterized by a firm respect for diversity of opinion. Ideas are viewed as an opportunity to explore, and mistakes as an opportunity to learn. Teams are encouraged to reflect on how they work, not only so that accomplishments can be celebrated but so that needed improvements can be introduced.

### **Organizational Dimension**

At the level of the organization, learning organizations connect learning to organizational transformation; that is to say, learning is about developing the organization itself. The learning organization is thus also an instrument of change, possibly profound change. Learning organizations see learning as a driver of productivity and invest in it accordingly. It is not something that happens at the margin of organizational life – in a classroom somewhere for a few days.

Under most definitions, the learning organization is a self-reflective organization. It not only seeks to achieve results, but also seeks to understand how it achieves results. It actively seeks to learn from its successes and failures. It asks itself difficult questions, can discuss its weaknesses openly, and has the courage to correct itself. It regularly challenges its basic assumptions about how things are done. In sum, it seeks to overcome what Argyris calls their organizational defence patterns – routine excuses, knee-jerk reflexes and “skilled incompetence.”

The learning organization is an ideal, a prescriptive model. If we run out and try to find one somewhere, chances are we will come back empty-handed. However one might define the learning organization, building one is a project in strategic change. A suite of tools, a website, and a series of workshops by themselves will not do. Four or five training days a year, a learning plan, and training budget will not do either. There is no “cook-book” recipe for creating one.

At the heart of the learning organization, in the words of Steven Appelbaum, there is “a shift of mind.” There is also a change of heart. The learning organization seeks not just to build its IQ but its EQ as well. And it must build this not only at the level of individuals and groups but also within the entire organization. Bringing this type of deep change about takes years, sustained effort, executive support, and a well-developed plan.

## TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The literature on the learning organization often distinguishes two types of learning:

Corrective Learning	Transformational Learning
<p>Discussions of the learning organization and organizational learning often draw a broad distinction between two types of learning. The first of these is often called corrective or, alternatively, single-loop learning.</p> <p>Much of the learning that goes on in organizations focuses on identifying and correcting errors of one kind or another, with the intent naturally of correcting these errors and introducing improvements. It is important to note that this form of learning does not aim at questioning organizational processes, structures, procedures, or practices. Rather, it takes them for granted; it works within them.</p> <p>Such learning is of course crucial to the success of any organization. Every organization, not simply learning organizations, must be capable of such corrective learning. Procedures and systems, no matter how well designed, inevitably have their shortcomings. Staying on the look-out for these is often a core part of the drive for efficiency and quality within an organization.</p>	<p>Transformational learning, or what is also called double-loop learning, is a form of learning that questions the norms, procedures, practices, processes, systems, and structures that corrective learning takes for granted. It too is concerned with a kind of correction, and is often connected to practical improvements of one kind or another. And yet, because of its reflective nature, it often involves more entrenched features of the organizational culture. Generally, organizations find transformational learning difficult and uncomfortable precisely because it involves questioning deeply held opinions and beliefs.</p> <p>As a rule, it is difficult for organizations to see themselves in the mirror. Transformational learning, therefore, is rare. If an organization is going to take full advantage of the transformative power of learning, however, it must discover ways of developing the capacity for such reflective learning. This means both breaking down barriers and building bridges.</p>

### A QUESTION

Before continuing, it is important to ask the simple question: What is so new about the idea of the learning organization? Organizations have always managed information and knowledge, right? Employees have always had to adjust to shifting realities through training and development, no? And organizations with an educated workforce have always had the competitive edge. So what, exactly, is new about the idea?

Perhaps the simplest way to see the difference is this. Traditionally, productive organizations have been viewed as centres of work. Their management has focused on planning, organizing, coordinating, directing and controlling the work. Everything else has taken a back seat, including the training and development of individuals. People were developed if the work left time for it. Doing work and learning were separate. Only doing work was thought to be connected to productive capacity. Training was often the first thing dropped in times of budgetary constraint.

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The Learning Organization sees the productive organization as not only a centre of work, but also a centre of learning.

The learning organization provides a different view of the productive organization. It sees the productive organization not only as a centre of work but also as a centre of learning. It connects learning to productive capacity, performance, continuous improvement, and competitive advantage. Moreover, just as an organization must be structured and managed to do work of a certain kind, so too it must be structured and managed to learn in certain ways. No one is suggesting that employees learn for the sake of learning, or that the productive organization be seen as a university. The point is rather to see learning, at the individual, group, and organizational level, as an integral part of the strategic platform for productive capacity. This insight stands at the heart of the learning organization.

For some key definitions of related terms, see Annex A.

## **THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION: LEVELS OF TRANSFORMATION**

As mentioned earlier, building the learning organization is an exercise in leading and managing strategic change. When we examine what is required to bring about such a change, we see at least three dimensions of transformation: the individual, the team, and the organization itself.

### **Transformation I: Individuals in the Learning Organization**

Individuals in the workplace are faced with the practical need to accomplish certain tasks. Their working world is shaped mainly by the here and now – the need to get something done according to a schedule and budget. Individual learning is therefore often focused on giving the individual the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to accomplish the task at hand. This has been the traditional role of learning in most organizations: figure out what individuals need to learn to get the job done, and see that they get the learning.

And yet, even though the individual is pressed by the need to achieve results, individuals inside learning organizations must learn to see themselves in a new way. In this respect, a personal transformation – a shift of mind and attitude – must underlie the learning organization. In short, individuals must become reflective, continuously questioning why things are done a certain way. They must learn to learn. In addition, they must see learning as a means to what Peter Senge would call a form of personal mastery – a way of taking charge of their own destinies. Part of this growth may focus on current needs, but part of it will look beyond current to future needs. The shift is in seeing learning as an avenue of continuous professional and personal growth, as opposed to seeing it solely as background needed for a specific position.

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### **Transformation II: Groups in the Learning Organization**

As mentioned earlier, learning organizations look to create a fluid movement of knowledge and experience across the organization. A good part of the discussion focuses on the most common form of grouping individuals to achieve productive tasks – the team.

The learning organization seeks to enhance group learning as a central skill of teams. Team discussion is based on a form of open dialogue characterized by a firm respect for diversity of opinion. The term “dialogue”, it should be noted, is an important one. Dialogue does not come easily to most teams. It is not just people talking to each other. It is more about listening actively than it is about talking. One seeks first to understand, and then

Dialogue is more about listening actively than it is about talking.

seeks to be understood. Ideas are viewed as an opportunity to explore, mistakes as an opportunity to learn, and meetings as an opportunity to share knowledge.

There is a balance between inquiry and discussion, on the one hand, and the need to make effective group decisions and to manage group activities to achieve common purposes, on the other hand. Teams are encouraged to reflect on how they work, not only so that accomplishments can be celebrated but so that needed improvements can be introduced. In a learning organization, teams are also seen as centres of development and learning, with the work often being distributed in such a way as to support individual learning and development.

### **Transformation III: The Organization as a Learning System**

Perhaps the most demanding challenge in coming to understand that the idea of the learning organization arises at this level. How can the organization itself figure in learning? What is its special role? How can it make a contribution to learning above and beyond the contributions made by teams and individuals? This topic is a difficult one. We need to give it some time. Much that is new and exciting about the idea of a learning organization – the central idea of systems thinking, for instance – emerges at this level. We will look at it from several different angles here, without however trying to arrive at a definitive view.

As mentioned earlier, an organization can be said to learn only to the extent that it can be made aware of and respond appropriately to events in its environment. In this respect, a learning organization may be compared with an organism: it has receptors that allow it to gauge even subtle changes in its environment and thus has an ongoing means of finding its way in the world. External changes, moreover, are translated into internal changes. In the best of cases, these internal changes are processed and stored as a more durable capacity to manage the many obstacles – the multiples bends and twists – of external change. As a result, the organization is better able to adapt and hence better able to survive.

Part of the organizational role in learning – again as opposed to the role of either individuals or teams – is therefore to achieve an awareness of its environment. How do organizations do this? There is little mystery here. One way organizations achieve such awareness is by regularly scanning their environments. A well-conducted environment scan can produce critical organizational knowledge. This is called “organizational knowledge” for a reason. Only the organization acting as an organization can produce it. The environment must be scanned from all perspectives within the organization: the perspectives of individuals and teams must be brought together so that the organization can see as one.

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Simply put, adaptability requires that the inside respond to the outside. Knowledge itself is not enough; the organization must act on the knowledge it has. Its capacity to act will depend in part on its structure, and thus we come full circle. But structure is not the only internal factor that matters. Culture matters; process matters; relationships matter; and so on. Seeing the organization as a learning system means looking at all the key parts of the organization. It also means looking at how they connect to each other. This is the dimension of systems thinking that comes with the learning organization. The core insight is this: it is not enough to talk about individuals and teams if we are going to get organizations to adapt, evolve, and thrive; we also need to talk about the organization itself.

## **TRANSFORMATION ROLES**

Building the learning organization is inevitably a collective exercise. Everyone has to help to draft the blueprint; everyone has to carry a hammer and nails. There is no place to sit around and just watch the building go up. The transformation must happen at all three levels: the individual, the teams, and the organization. Now, that said, some members of the construction team have roles that are more critical to the success of the project than others. We will focus on two of these roles here, that of the executives within the organization and that of its HR professionals, more specifically its learning professionals.

### **Executive Leadership**

Perhaps the single most important trait in building a culture of learning is leadership. Leadership, ideally, exists at all organizational levels. In reality, however, the most influential leadership belongs to senior executives. It is they who set an example for the organization. And it is they who can best exemplify the ideal of a learning organization.

There is nothing abstract about the process. A results-obsessed senior executive who rushes from meeting to meeting sets a pattern for other managers. The latter will find themselves running from place to place, project to project, thinking of results and little else. Such a pattern leaves little room for learning or reflection, little time for the expression of a shared vision, and little opportunity for people to consider the organization as a whole. Organizations dominated by this type of leadership culture cannot even begin to function as learning organizations. By contrast, senior executives who encourage people to question, to reflect, to debate, and to learn also set an example. It is this example that must inspire the learning organization.

Executive development based on an appropriate model of leadership is also crucial to developing the learning organization.

### **HR Professionals**

In many respects, HR professionals are key agents of change in building a learning organization. This does not mean of course that the learning organization is an HR project. Viewed in this way, the effort to build a learning organization is almost certainly bound to fail. The whole organization has to be involved: individuals, groups of individuals, and the organization as a whole. Each must have its own role and responsibility.

As a first step, the organization will have to ask itself probing questions about how it packages work, structures its processes, creates internal and external relationships, and the like. This is not research for research's sake. The point is to develop an informed and compelling vision of the desired learning organization, based on an understanding of the existing organizational mandate, mission and culture. The vision needs to answer the following question: where, in general terms, is the organization planning to go when we talk about building the learning organization? HR professionals, specifically learning professionals, have a crucial role in this discussion. Their expertise and organizational understanding will give a shape to the vision that can excite and engage the entire organization. Part of their role, then, is to serve as organizational visionaries.

Such a bold vision of the future must be balanced, however, by a strategy and a practical plan. Informed by the vision, the strategy is a comprehensive picture of the key components of the change and answers the questions, Which direction will we be taking to arrive at our destination? How do we see change in relation to the individual? Teams? The organization itself? The

strategy should answer these questions. Beyond that, it should show how these answers connect to the learning organization pictured in the vision. The practical steps come with the plan. The plan should look at feasible steps that can be taken in the shorter term. Without a translation in simple and feasible terms, the vision of the learning organization will remain at best a piece of wishful thinking. The difference between the flavour of the month and a solid idea is the plan.

The role of the learning professional as change agent encompasses at least the following skills and competencies:

- Visioning
- Strategizing
- Planning
- Consulting
- Researching: probing and surveying the organization
- Communicating
- Influencing
- Facilitating

This is just a sampling. But it is perhaps enough to see that the role of the learning professional as a change agent is a complex but exciting one.

## **SOME STEPS TO BUILDING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS**

As mentioned earlier, there is no simple roadmap to the learning organization. While it has become a cliché, the path to the learning organization is a journey. We have a general idea of our destination, but we must find our own way there. Different organizations take different paths. And of course there is no organization that can claim to have arrived at the final destination. There is no success story that says it all and no set of best practices that we can adopt as our own. The best practice in this case is to think for yourself. In other words, the journey is a deep learning experience.

Although the expert discussion and academic debate are too full of divergent opinion to support a unified roadmap, there is a convergence on core principles or themes. It is clear, for instance, that a general approach to building a learning organization needs to focus on each of the core learning dimensions: the individual, the group, and the organization itself. It must look at the organizational factors that give an underlying structure to the organization: its processes, procedures, policies, systems, and governance. It must look as well at such nebulous but nevertheless influential factors as the organizational culture. The approach must, in short, regard the organization as a learning system.

The following list of observations is drawn from a reading of the literature over the last 20 years or so. These observations should be taken as parts of a whole. That is, applying any one of the principles will not produce a learning organization. A systematic approach would need to incorporate some variation of all of the principles. Again, we will try to provide an exhaustive list here, but focus instead on a choice selection of the principles.

## Individual Dimension

### Strategies

- Give individuals the time to learn.
- See the distribution of work from the lens of development and learning. Do not ask simply, *Who can get the job done?* Ask *Who can get the job done and learn along the way?*
- Assess performance with a view to learning and development too – Ask both *What has the individual done?* and *What has the individual learned?* Give weight to both in any formal or informal assessment.
- Select and develop for competencies that support a learning organization – active listening, mentoring, coaching, etc, and focus management and leadership development accordingly.
- Give managers the time to function as learning coaches.
- Create incentives and rewards for individual learning.
- Create incentives and rewards for managers as learning coaches.

The departments and agencies of the federal government have achieved a significant degree of success in building a culture of continuous learning within the public service. As the PSES statistics show, however, there is more work to be done.

Management and leadership development needs to concentrate on the role of the manager as a learning coach. This is not just a matter of advising individuals on courses and learning tools. Much more fundamentally, it is a matter of encouraging individuals to take the responsibilities and risks of learning into their own hands and providing the support they need to grow professionally and personally. The good learning coach can help people reflect on their learning by asking the right questions and by otherwise guiding individuals in their self-development. What the manager can bring to the discussion is a sense of the broader sense of the organization. This of course can help individuals steer their learning and development towards certain career objectives.

If the learning organization is about anything, it is about taking learning seriously. As we have seen in this primer, it is about seeing learning as a fundamental pillar of organizational success. What this means, in very practical terms, is that organizations must clear time for learning. This is crucial, and most organizations, public or private, do not do it, or do not do it enough. Most organizations drive towards results. Very little else matters. If some learning can be done along the way, well and good. But what matters is the results. Most performance management systems focus on results too. This is a very short-term view of success; it is often fatal to the organization in the longer term. Still, it is a common view.

The learning organization cannot happen at any level if learning is not seen for what it is: a strategic factor of organizational success and growth. This requires, at the very least, that people are encouraged to take time to learn and are in fact given ample time to do so. It also requires that their managers be given the time to guide their learning with the broader organizational purpose in mind. It is of course artificial to set a number of days for learning, five days, let us say, or ten. The ideal after all is to have people learning all of the time – the ideal of continuous, life-long learning. Although we cannot reach this ideal in any complete sense, we can move towards it by using work to shape opportunities for learning, by encouraging individuals to



reflect on their work, and by encouraging their managers to guide their work with a view to learning and development.

To see how different the world of learning organization can be, picture a performance assessment in which the individual does not accomplish certain stated results but is nevertheless praised and perhaps even rewarded because he or she drew important lessons from this “failure” and openly shared them with colleagues. Here learning is prized above the achievement of results, and learning is rewarded because it is tied to both future individual and organizational success.

## Team Dimension

### Strategies

- Support diversity of viewpoints (challenge the accepted wisdom – inform strategy with debate).
- Encourage dialogue as a standard for group conversations and deliberations.
- Focus on building a learning culture within teams, especially the executive team.

As William O'Brien, the former CEO of Hanover Life Insurance, observes in reference to the idea of a learning organization, a key attribute that twenty-first-century companies will need is conversation. That is to say, organizations will need to manage teams in such a way that the knowledge and learning capacity of the team is greater than the sum of the knowledge and learning capacity of the individuals who compose it. A good conversation, let alone a great one, always has an element of learning it. We walk away feeling somehow enriched and enlightened.

This conversation is not the art of small talk. It is the art of a conversation grounded in respect, candour, and the willingness to succeed and learn as a team. Call this dialogue. It is the kind of conversation that can tackle the difficult topics without sacrificing the integrity of the team or the dignity of the individuals inside it. Most conversations and most decisions in modern organizations happen in teams. It is therefore critical that this art of dialogue be carefully nurtured. It is important in this context to note as well that most learning on the job happens in a team context. If the individuals on the team cannot have an honest and respectful conversation about their own performance and the overall performance of the team, the team will effectively cease to function as a unit of learning within the organization.

Teams are not born with this conversational skill, as just about anyone who has worked with teams will know. Rather, the art of conversation must be instilled by bringing individuals to reflect on how they participate in teams. The team itself often needs to reflect on its conversational approach as well. When teams come together on common projects, the organization needs to reflect as well on how the teams carry on the collective conversation.

The challenge is not just to write out a set of standards for conversation, but also and more importantly to ensure that individuals internalize these standards so that they become embedded in the organizational culture. Organizational development professionals can be helpful allies here.

Whichever supports we bring to the task, the main point is not to take team conversation as a given, as something that just happens by itself. Instead it must become an explicit point of attention for any strategy that seeks to design and build a learning organization. Moreover,

dialogue is about more than good communications skills: it is about getting individuals to reveal their own assumptions, beliefs, concerns, and expectations so that trust can flourish and the team can formulate, commit to, and act upon a collective vision of the task at hand.

## Organizational Dimension

### Strategies

- Get senior executives to embrace the ideal of a learning organization.
- See learning as connected to the strategic future of the organization: *Where do we have to be in five years and how do we have to develop people now to get there?*
- Ask *What does the organization need to know that it does not know? What are its areas of crucial ignorance?* Note, these areas of ignorance could include itself. It is unwise to assume that organization is self-aware.
- See such processes as strategic planning, environment scanning, foresighting, and organizational culture assessment as learning processes. Distribute the knowledge across the organization so that individuals and teams can learn about the organization.
- Review the organizational culture particularly with a view to describing its learning capacity, focusing on individuals, groups, and the organization itself – an organizational learning diagnostic. Share it across the organization so that individuals and teams can learn.
- Focus on the learning culture of the executive team.
- Develop executives to exemplify the desired learning culture.
- Give executives the time to learn.
- Reward executives who learn and who promote learning.
- Prepare a strategy for building the learning organization and see its implementation as an exercise in change leadership and organizational learning.

In the end, the effort to design and build the learning organization depends on the ability to see the organization itself from a systems perspective. It is not enough to see the parts – the individual, the team, and the organization itself. One must see how they interrelate and either become or fail to become an effective whole.

The learning organization is about looking outside and inside as sources of knowledge.

## **A CONCLUDING THOUGHT**

In sum, designing and building the learning organization is an ambitious task, requiring focus on three pivotal dimensions of learning and transformation.

There has been no effort here to lay out a plan for building such an organization for two reasons. First, as has been mentioned several times along the way, you need to think through your own plan. Second, there is no accepted model for building the learning organization. At this point in the development of the field, a general plan – something that can be applied across the board to all organizations – would at best be a work of creative fiction. It is difficult to find a success story that does justice to the full scope of the learning organization. Can we point to one organization that has covered all of the bases, so to speak? The answer is no.

Organizations are beginning to transform themselves under the guidance of the idea of a learning organization. They are beginning to explore their adaptive capacity from the perspective of individual, team, and organizational learning. More importantly, they are beginning to see results. Describing these efforts in detail here is beyond the scope of a primer. The following list of links and resources should help you get your thinking and reflection started.

## Annex A: Other Key Terms

### Learning

It might help to ask the basic question, What is learning? In the typical case, we say that we have learned something when we can perform some relevant test successfully. We have learned intermediate French, for instance, when we have mastered all of the key tenses in the language and have enough vocabulary to carry on a five-minute conversation, let us say. Learning involves both knowledge and skill: one must be able to explain and to apply a concept, idea, or technique in order to say that one has learned it.

But what is learning on the inside, so to speak? What happens to someone when they have learned something? How do they change? What happens to them?

Without going into the philosophical complexities – there is much about the psychology of learning we do not understand – learning represents a form of growth, an ability to succeed in a new way or along a different dimension. The individual learner acquires new knowledge, a new skill, or a new ability, and this allows him or her to respond to current and future challenges more effectively. In a world of constant change, the individual must become a continuous learner, since learning represents the one way in which the individual can grow to meet the demands of change. Learning, then, is the ability to adapt to change through the acquisition of new knowledge, abilities, or skills.

This is not the final word on learning, needless to say. The field is enormously complex, and there is no agreement on a single definition of what it means to learn.

### Continuous Learning:

This concept is perhaps familiar to most of us. The idea has become so familiar that its revolutionary nature can escape us. Maybe a little history will help.

Industrial workers had to learn how to do the job. But after this initial learning was out of the way, they often simply applied their learning. Further learning was rare. Post-industrial employees face a very different reality. Work and learning are no longer separate dimensions of the job: one must learn in order to work; one must work in order to learn. The two now often come together. This is what it means to be a knowledge worker, in short.

Continuous learners see the job as an opportunity to learn and grow. Although they appreciate formal opportunities to learn, they see every dimension of their working life as an opportunity to learn and grow. We say “grow” here for a reason. The point is not simply to acquire knowledge but also to develop competencies. IQ matters, but EQ matters too. In other words, the continuous learner seeks to grow not only as a professional but as a person too. For this reason, continuous learners seek feedback and use it to improve their professional and personal performance.

The definition of continuous learning in the Learning Policy captures the core of the idea:

**Continuous learning** — a lifelong process of training, development, and learning. Once individuals work in an environment where these three activities are present, and actively participate in each, lifelong learning becomes a reality.

Organizations dedicated to continuous learning support individual learners in their professional and personal growth. An important part of this is supplying employees with the tools and opportunities they need to learn. There are a host of traditional options, not to mention numerous options related to recent technologies. With respect to tacit knowledge, such organizations understand the developmental potential of work. They see work – packaged in projects and programs – as opportunities for their people to learn and grow. Working and learning are two sides of the same coin.

In sum, a continuous learning organization is, first of all, an organization in which individuals are dedicated to training, development, and learning throughout their professional careers. Second, it is an organization that actively supports such individuals.

### **Learning Culture:**

Another concept frequently emerging in discussions of the learning organization is the concept of a learning culture. The term “culture” itself is somewhat nebulous. Attaching the qualifier “learning” to it, of course, does not make the matter much clearer. The term does not have precise edges. When applied to organizations, it usually refers to the set of behavioural patterns, beliefs, and values that define how people within the organization go about accomplishing the organizational purpose.

Much of the organizational culture sits in what we might call the organizational subconscious – the unstated assumptions and beliefs that can nevertheless effectively shape the behaviour of individuals within the organization. Peter Senge calls these mental models. Those of us who have worked for a while in a science department, for instance, will have a rough idea of the organizational culture. Describing it in detail is a difficult task and involves the use of sophisticated tools.

The term is important to the present discussion because the drive to build a learning organization is often seen as a sustained transformation of the learning culture within an organization. In this respect, building a learning organization goes deep. Individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole must question current beliefs and come to see themselves in a new way if the learning culture is to be transformed.

From the perspective of leading change, too, it is important to try to understand the learning culture of an organization before attempting to transform it. Although the academic experts debate the point, most would agree that it is unwise to attempt to transform a culture all at once. A culture is a source of strength, but it is also a potential source of resistance. Cultures are entrenched by definition. Leading the transformation to a learning organization requires knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the existing learning culture, since there is no option but to build the new culture on the old. As mentioned, organizational cultures depend on processes, systems, procedures, practices, relationships and beliefs. Transforming such a culture, then, requires taking a systematic approach. There are many parts to the puzzle.

### **Organizational Learning:**

How does an organization learn? How do we differentiate individual and organizational learning? The problem here is perhaps just this, organizations learn in much the same way individuals do – by having open dialogue on key assumptions, by being inquisitive and remaining open to the world, by reflecting on practices and patterns, by listening to valued

friends and sincere critics, by implementing techniques and tools that produce new insights. It is tempting to conclude, then, that individual and organizational learning are identical.

Organizations create the conditions for organizational learning when they implement processes, practices and programs that allow a culture of learning to be built and maintained. Individuals put these things into place, but this does not mean that organizational learning is reducible to individual learning.

Organizational learning is an attribute of the organization and its culture, not simply of the individuals inside it. After all, a collection of individuals is no more an organization than a collection of parts is a Rolls Royce. In addition to the individuals within it, an organization is a set of programs, processes, systems, structures, relationships, and beliefs, and practices. These organizational elements provide a kind of structured world for both individuals and groups, and they can be designed either to enable or to hinder organizational learning. If designed to promote organizational learning, the organization can be said to learn when it uses knowledge to adapt itself to its environment so as to better achieve its purpose.

The following questions focus on the organizational dimension in organizational learning:

- (1) How does the organization deal with failure?
- (2) How does it go about solving problems?
- (3) How does it remain aware of its environment?
- (4) How does it achieve new insights?
- (5) How does it share knowledge and information?
- (6) How does it encourage reflection?
- (7) How does knowledge flow through the organization?

This represents a small sample of questions. For now it is important to note one thing about these questions: the answers must look beyond individuals and groups to the processes, systems, structures, practices, relationships, and beliefs that shape the behaviour of individuals within the organization. This does not mean that of course we can ignore individuals and groups. They are the driving force in any organization. It is merely to point out that organizational learning involves much more than individual learning. Organizational learning is something *organizations* do or fail to do.

Nicely summarizing a number of these considerations, Schwandt (1993) describes organizational learning in the following terms:

A system of actions, actors, symbols and processes that enables an organization to transform information into valued knowledge which in turn increases its long-term adaptive capacity.

A similar definition, and perhaps the earliest definition, is in Cyert and March (1963):

Organizational learning is adaptive behaviour of organizations over time.

Sometimes the concept is defined without reference to adaptability, as in Fiol and Lyles (1985):

Organizational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding.

So, what is the relationship between organizational learning and the learning organization? The question is not a simple one. The literature does not provide a clear answer. Some would say

organizational learning is the “*activity* and the *process* by which organizations eventually reach the ideal of a learning organization.” (Finger and Brand 1999) This definition, however, overlooks an important difference.

The literature on organizational learning tends to focus on describing the process of learning within organizations. How do organizations learn? How do they fail to learn? It is important to note the focus here: the organization itself. The literature on the learning organization, by contrast, tends to focus on an ideal or prescriptive model of organizations. These models, however, typically focus on at least three dimensions: the individual, groups, and the organization. How can we design organizations to accelerate the process of organizational learning though each of these three dimensions? Which kind of model best support organizational learning in this broader sense? These are the questions that drive the discussion of learning organizations. Senge’s fivefold model of the learning organization, for instance, deals with each of these dimensions and explores many of these questions.

Another difference is worth noting here. The research on organizational learning tends to be the work of academic researchers, whereas much of the work on learning organizations tends to be done by organizational consultants and professionals in human resources and organizational development.

One way to approach organizational learning is to focus on the dimension of organizational structure. Different organizations are structured in different ways. Broadly speaking, the engineering of traditional organizational structure has focused largely on vertical dimensions. Organizations are divided into certain key business lines; individuals and teams and associated processes and systems that support them are organized in a vertical line to the point of authority at the top. This familiar structure has its advantages. There is, for instance, a clear line of authority and control, rendering the organization predictable and stable.

From the perspective of learning, however, such a structure presents clear disadvantages: knowledge, both explicit and tacit, often gets trapped inside these vertical structures, restricting the field of potential learning. Of course, too, it is not only knowledge that can get trapped. The people can get trapped too, making it difficult to develop individuals or teams with respect to such key competencies as organizational awareness. As we saw earlier, restricting the fields of learning and development in this way ultimately means restricting the organization’s adaptive capacity.

In response to such flaws in traditional organizational structure, organizational theorists and designers have proposed over the last 30 to 40 years flatter organizational structures. These structures see individuals and teams organized much more horizontally. Often these horizontal units bring together individuals from different parts of the organization, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and learning. While increasing the range of learning and development, these newer structures have their own stresses and strains. It is not easy too create and manage cross-functional teams: it is almost as if people from different organizational backgrounds spoke different languages at times.

Needless to say, there are many hybrids in between these vertical and horizontal conceptions of organizational structure. The point here, however, is not to discuss the niceties of organizational structure, but rather to underscore the general point that organizational structure is something that must be examined if we are to begin to understand the organization as a learning system. Which organizational structure best supports individual and team learning best allows the

organization to use knowledge to adapt to changes in its environment? This is a key question underlying any serious strategic approach to building the learning organization.

The question of organizational structure is by no means the only way to approach the organization as a learning system. Another way to approach this third level of transformation is to ask how the organization can function as a learning system. Again, this matter is complex, so we will focus only on some essential notions here.

The activity sometimes referred to as *foresight* is another example of acquiring organizational knowledge. In this case, the organization glimpses into the future with a view to anticipating emerging trends in its environment. The practical point is to give the organization a chance to position itself for the future in the here and now. Adaptability is the objective. Strategic planning, when properly conducted, is another means of acquiring organizational knowledge. Whether these forms of acquiring organizational *knowledge* lead to organizational *learning* depends on how the organization responds to the knowledge it acquires.

An organization in which individuals and teams learn continuously may or may not be a learning organization. The two are not the same. Moreover, while it might be fair to describe a learning culture as a culture in which people learn continuously, it is not clear that the presence of a learning culture entails the presence of a learning organization. Individuals and teams within an organization can learn continuously – be given the tools, the support, the incentives, the rewards – while the organization fails to learn.



## Annex B: A Brief Note on the Research

Anyone approaching the literature on the learning organization and organizational learning had better be prepared to do some serious thinking. Precise definitions are hard to come by, and authors tend to use similar or identical terms in different ways. It is easy to get lost in the conceptual forest. The literature draws on findings from cultural anthropology, management science, sociology and organizational theory, group psychology, cognitive science, and systems thinking, to name a few of the sources. True, some theorists – Peter Senge comes to mind – have made a name for themselves. But it should be remembered that every theorist in this domain has his or her critics. Furthermore, most theorists – Senge again is an example – admit the limitations of their theories and speculations, noting that the field is young and that a great deal of work remains to be done before conclusions are asserted with confidence.

In its present state, the literature gives us enough insight into the phenomenon of organizational learning for us to start the practical work of designing approaches to removing barriers to organizational learning and otherwise furthering its development in our own workplaces. We had the steam engine before we had the laws of thermodynamics: sometimes we get to the right scientific understanding by applying our hands and minds to the task at hand – the science comes later when we reflect on how we have managed to succeed. This would seem to be where we are with organizational learning. We know enough to make an intelligent start. The rest is for us to learn as we go. It is an ideal field for action research.

As for the learning organization, the literature here tends to focus on drafting a reasonably robust blueprint of how such an organization would function. Different pictures emerge in the literature, most notably that of Senge, whose prescriptive paradigm has become quite influential. This is not the place to discuss Senge's work, but it should be noted here that the distinction in this primer between individual, group, and organizational levels of learning appears in Senge, albeit in different, more elaborate terms. What makes Senge's work notable is the grandeur of the synthesis: he draws from all of the fields mentioned above and many more besides and yet brings them into a united view. Senge aside, many other thinkers have attempted to sketch out the contours of the learning organization. This primer, as noted in the introduction, has sought to focus on the principal and common elements of the learning organization as described in the literature.

What is striking about the idea of the learning organization is its emphasis on the organization. Individual learning has always had a place in educational theory – an enormous field itself – and group learning has been a prominent concern of psychologists and sociologists ever since the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin, which powerfully influenced, among others, Peter Senge. But the focus on the organization – more specifically on how processes, procedures, practices, beliefs, relationships, structures and systems affect the capacity of the organization react to change – is quite new. It may sound odd, but we need to keep in mind that the modern organization is only about 150 years old, arising for the first time with machine production in the industrial revolution.

Although most of us work in one, there is a lot about the organization that we do not understand. We should also mention in this context that we are arguably living at a time when the dominant paradigm of the bureaucratic organization is collapsing. This paradigm has held the field for most of the 150-year history of the modern organization. The learning organization may be seen

as a rival paradigm, an emerging alternative. In this respect, the learning organization is as much about the organization as it is about learning.

This is part of the reason why the idea is profound: We understand the idea of the learning organization when we can really see that the organization itself can and should be designed and built as a tool for learning. The ability to learn is what will drive the organization towards comparative advantage, competitive success and sustained growth. While the novelty of the idea is centred on the organizational dimension, the learning organization helps individuals grow and thrive, a result that extends to the group level as well.

The recent literature on organizational learning and the learning organization focuses mainly on two areas: first, empirical studies aimed at showing that there is a connection between the learning organization and competitive success and the capacity for growth; and second, measurement systems that can be used to provide a diagnostic of the capacity of an organization to learn at all three of the levels of the learning organization. While it would be premature to hazard a summary judgment on the success of these efforts, it would appear that the empirical connections are beginning to emerge. We are finding that organizations that exemplify some of the core dimensions of the learning organization are better able to thrive in our world of change. The diagnostic frameworks are being found to exhibit an impressive measure of reliability and validity as backdrops for organizational assessment and as predictors of success.

All told, the fields of the learning organization and organizational learning are still unfolding as areas of inquiry, study, and learning. There are no hard results or fundamental laws of the sort that we find in physics or chemistry. But there are important insights, plausible theories, and a vigorous research program underway. There is much we do not understand. Again, however, it can be argued that we know enough to start the crucial work of organizational transformation that will help us build the vibrant and exciting centres of work, learning, and human development that we call the learning organization.

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## Online Resources

Chris Argyris: Theories of Action, Double-Loop Learning and Organizational Learning

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm>

Dialogue from Peter Senge's Perspective

<http://www.soapboxorations.com/ddigest/senge.htm>

Donald Schon (Schön): Learning, Reflection and Change

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm>

Fieldbook.com –The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook Project

<http://www.fieldbook.com/>

Inventing Organizations of the 21st Century

<http://ccs.mit.edu/21c/>

The Learning and Development Committee (Canada School of Public Service)

[http://www.cmd-ccg.gc.ca/lcd/index\\_e.html](http://www.cmd-ccg.gc.ca/lcd/index_e.html)

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The Learning Organization

<http://www.infed.org/biblio/learning-organization.htm>

The Learning Performance Index (Conference Board of Canada)

<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/humanresource/LPI/>

Online Papers by Peter Senge

<http://www.ing.ula.ve/~rsotaqui/sistemika/fifth/senge-pap.html>

Organizational Learning and Cognition

<http://choo.fis.utoronto.ca/FIS/OrgCog/>

Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management

[http://www.myschool-monecole.gc.ca/services/specialists/holf/presentation/mcdowall/index\\_e.html](http://www.myschool-monecole.gc.ca/services/specialists/holf/presentation/mcdowall/index_e.html)

Peter Senge and the Learning Organization

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>

A Primer on Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning

<http://www.systemsprimer.com/index.html>

Resources on Peter Senge's Learning Organization

<http://commhum.mccneb.edu/PHILOS/senge.htm>

The Society for Organizational Learning

<http://www.solonline.org/>

## **Annex D: A Parting Tale of Woe: Failing to Learn**

Eastman Kodak was quite comfortable making traditional cameras and film. It had an enviable record of success and was widely regarded as an industry leader. Then along came digital technology, or more specifically the digital camera. Kodak engineers, who were aware of the technology, kept on mentioning the emerging reality of the digital camera and underscored its potential to revolutionize the industry. Kodak engineers were not the only ones who saw the revolutionary significance of digital technology. Most of Kodak's competitors, large and small, could at least glimpse what was lying on the horizon. They were smart enough to be curious.

To make a long story short, Eastman Kodak could not hear its own people talk. Even as digital technology crept towards viable commercial applications, Kodak continued to produce traditional cameras and films. As a result, an industrial giant has lost an incredible portion of its market share over the last 25 years and is now a fading presence in the marketplace.

This tale of woe, it should be noted, is not about lack of knowledge. Kodak had an excellent scientific and engineering department. Rather it was a case of not listening to people who were looking beyond the next horizon. The organization failed to keep its head up. A study of this case will show that it was not just about stubborn executives at the top refusing to acknowledge reality, although this is part of the story. It is also about how the organization itself was structured, about its underlying culture, and about how it managed its teams.

It is often the uncomfortable truths that need to be heard most. The learning organization should open a path these truths. Senge talks a great deal about mental models: The learning organization should be on guard against the natural tendency to embed certain core and often unquestioned assumptions in the organizational culture.

## **ANNEX E: The School's Strategic Change Role:**

### ***Building Capacity of Public Sector Leaders to Transform their Organizations based on Best Management Practices***

#### **Transformation in the Public Service**

Senior public service leaders are called upon increasingly to lead significant transformation initiatives that are changing the face of government. To do so, they need to adapt modern leadership concepts taught at the School to the particular challenges that exist within their organization. To meet this need, the School, building on its success in leadership programs and research in innovative approaches to public management, is becoming a strategic partner to senior leaders and departmental management teams. The School provides a range of strategic services to support intact departmental management teams as they address their organizational leadership and learning challenges. These services are provided within an integrated service delivery model that is guided by three enterprise-wide learning priorities reflective of the prevailing themes of current government reforms: delivering on the core functions of government, managing for excellence, and understanding the world and the future.

#### **Strategic Change Services**

The School offers strategic change services to a select number of departments that are undergoing transformations critical to the government's public service reform agenda. The School's strategic change services respond to the unique and varied needs of the departments' management teams and their particular transformation initiatives. They include:

- Organizational needs assessment, diagnostics and strategies that integrate leadership development and best management practice approaches in order to accelerate deep organizational change and achieve excellence in fulfilling management accountabilities;
- Transformation leadership advice, guidance, strategies, workshops, methodology and tools to increase, during the transformation initiative, organizational and individual capacity to lead transformations and manage the organization's developing knowledge assets; and
- Leadership competency development *in situ* with intact management teams, based on the School's leadership framework, that integrates a decade of work on leadership in the Public Service, and adapts it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century environment and the different organizational contexts of departmental management teams.

#### **By-products**

Lessons learned from client engagements, along with materials, tools and templates inform the School's program offerings, ensuring their continuing relevance to departmental needs. Comparative analyses of work on different transformations give rise to the adoption of standard methods and templates for intervening in transformation efforts and of effective practices in sharing and managing knowledge. These standards are shared with the broader organizational development and knowledge management community to build and sustain the professional support capacity that current and future government reforms require.

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