

The Knowledge Notebook

How Does a Learning Organization Learn?

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How comfortable do you feel sitting at your desk reading a book related to your job or your area of expertise? I mean sitting in plain view, reading most of the day, and *not* answering your phone or responding to e-mail or instant messages. If the answer is “not very” or “not at all” (which would be the answer in almost any organization I know), then how can we say you work in a “learning organization?” After all, you’re reading that book to increase your understanding—to learn. And yet many organizations, public and private, that would frown on a workday devoted to reading claim that they are learning organizations and that their employees are learning all the time. How do we account for this discrepancy? Does it matter? To answer those questions, let’s look at what it might really mean to be a learning organization.

The term “learning organization” has been around for twenty or thirty years and was given a tremendous boost with publication of Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990. This book, a surprise best-seller, popularized the ideas of organizational learning to the extent that chief learning officers were appointed in many organizations around the world. In particular, human resources departments took up Senge’s cause with passion and, more relevantly, with large training budgets to try to implement a portfolio of learning practices and policies. It became a serious management movement, and while it isn’t quite as popular now as it was a decade ago, the issues it raises are still with us. Indeed, many would say that learning and related issues are even more important now than they were ten or twenty years ago.

So what did this movement stand for? It tried to popularize the notion that organizations

obviously learned new things all the time. If they didn’t, they would quickly expire. Just how this learning occurred, who it was that learned anything, where they learned it, and how learning should be measured were the objects of much discussion and debate. But the learning processes and practices developed in most organizations reflected the same set of beliefs: namely, that more learning is always better (increasing the value of the organization’s human capital), that learning is at heart an individual activity, and that the basic mechanism for learning is some form of training. So what could be wrong with that?

Well, quite a bit. It turns out that most important learning occurs not in training sessions but on the job, with workers learning from each other by participating in and telling stories about the actual work and by reflecting afterward on what has and hasn’t worked. While some of this knowledge can be and often is codified, these documented learnings are usually presented by a trainer as some form of final truth that can’t be questioned—a far cry from the more subtle and flexible knowledge acquired on the job. It also turns out that learning has a significant emotional component. People learn more and more richly in real-life situations where something is at stake and the process is shared with colleagues, circumstances that usually have much more emotional content than either a classroom or a computer screen. An allied issue is trust and psychological safety. One learns best when one trusts the teacher and feels safe in questioning the material.

These findings support an even more important one: that the best and most useful

learning takes place in groups, in shared practices or other networks of people. The human-capital perspective, with its emphasis on individual learning, is far less valuable than the social-capital one. Most measurable changes in knowledge and skill can be shown to be social—learned within the group by adaptation or some informal mechanism. These groups rarely learn in a planned, linear, or even intentional way, and their informality—learning in the moment and from the moment—often produces the most credible and fully assimilated knowledge. Rather than try to absorb a whole body of knowledge—some useful, some not—they learn what they need to know.

So where does this leave us? The learning organization “test” I began with—reading a book at your desk—is clearly not the answer to the learning dilemma. Yes, it does reveal the level of an organization’s commitment to learning in its many and varied forms, and reading the right book can provide some important knowledge, but it clearly doesn’t offer the situational social learning that has so much value.

We still need to understand more about how organizational learning happens and what we can do to ensure that it is a continuous part of the work experience. We certainly need more sophisticated methods and tools than are offered in e-learning environments or in dull training sessions that no one looks forward to and few people remember. The true learning organization is still a goal to be attained, not an accomplished fact. We need organizational leaders who genuinely value learning and support wise managerial interventions and organizational policies that foster social, work- and practice-based learning. These interventions must be designed to strengthen and scale up what are now informal and sometimes accidental processes without making them mechanical, dull, and not especially relevant to people’s real knowledge needs. Finding the right approach is a challenge, but one that has to be met to create learning organizations that are worthy of the name. ●

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