

Learning Organization

What is it?¹

A learning organization is one that acquires knowledge and innovates fast enough to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing environment by embracing characteristics that encourage, support and promote participation.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge describes five characteristics that embody learning organizations:

- *Systems thinking*. This is the understanding of how everything works together—how all the parts influence one another to comprise the whole.
- *Personal mastery*. Individuals must learn for organizations to learn. Personal mastery of skills and knowledge is a journey with no final destination. It is more than just building skills and competencies; it involves a hunger for knowledge and continual improvement.
- *Mental models*. Senge defines this as “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.”²
- *Building shared vision*. Vision is more than a statement, it is a shared future. When all of your staff believe and see the vision, it can become reality. A shared vision creates excitement and synergies to work toward common goals.
- *Team learning*. Team learning begins when individual assumptions are abandoned and an organization’s members begin to think together. This requires a culture of understanding and openness. Hoarders of information and knowledge have no place in learning organizations. The idea is for everyone to share what they know and build on the sum knowledge of the entire team.

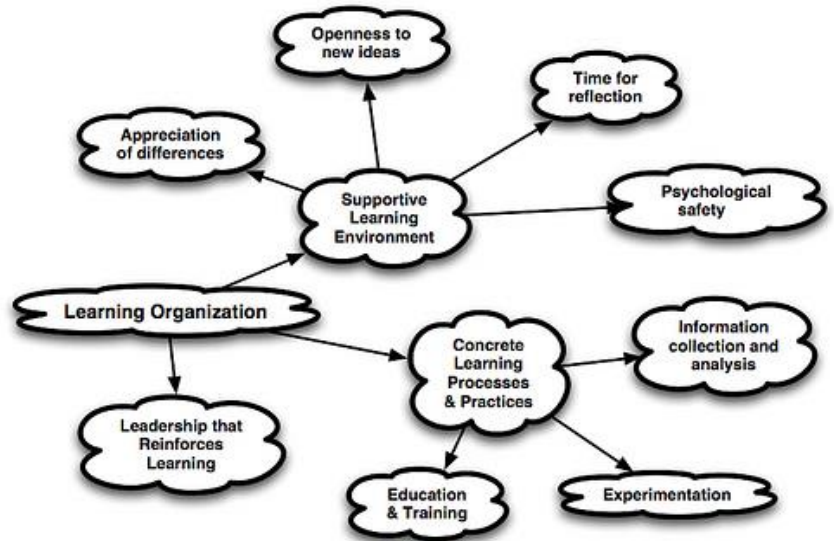


Image Source: <http://blog.learnlets.com/?p=612>

Examples of leading practices of a learning organization at NASA include projects that consult lessons learned from previous like-projects at new project start-up, teams that document lessons learned and action plans through pause and learns and after action reviews etc (reference other tools?)

How do I start?³

Organizational leaders can create mechanisms for information sharing and distribution such as brief reports, knowledge jams, face-to-face meetings, storytelling arenas, and town meetings. Leaders can provide shared repositories of relevant knowledge while rewarding people for using these mechanisms.

Some organizations have helped to cultivate these leaders and mechanisms by creating the position of Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO). The CKO’s role is to facilitate the flow of knowledge and information throughout the organization and demonstrate learning activities such as:

- Talk freely about what they are learning from outside the organization’s boundaries
- Openly query others about what they are learning
- Force themselves to stay open to learning, even when business conditions make it difficult

^{1,2} Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.

³ Wilhelm.W. http://www.clomedia.com/articles/what_are_learning_organizations_and_what_do_they_really_do

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Important Tips⁴

Leading Harvard University expert David Garvin describes six critical practices to move an organization forward:

- Collect intelligence about the environment
- Learn from best practices of other organizations
- Learn from its own experiences and history
- Experiment with new approaches
- Encourage systematic problem solving
- Transfer knowledge throughout the organization

How can I learn more?

- **JPL Case Study Approach Engages Active Learning:**
<https://appel.nasa.gov/2014/05/16/jpl-case-study-approach-engages-active-learning/>
- **Building a Learning Organization:**
<https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization>
- **NASA Academy of Project/Program Engineering Leadership:**
<https://appel.nasa.gov/career-resources/>
- **Peter Senge:**
<http://infed.org/mobi/peter-senge-and-the-learning-organization/>
- **The Importance of Learning Organizations:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUP4WcfNyAA>
- **David Garvin on Building a More Effective Learning Organization in Mission Critical Settings:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoMNq4Tijto>

⁴ Garvin. D. Building a More Effective Learning Organization usinessdictionary.com. Learning Organization, www.businessdictionary.com/definition/learning-organization.html.