

The Paradox of Creating a Learning Organization

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A story is told of an island somewhere and its inhabitants. The people longed to move to another land where they could have a healthier and better life. The problem was the practical arts of swimming and sailing had never been developed -- or may have been lost long before. For that reason, some people simply refused to think of alternatives to life on an island, whereas others intended to seek solutions to their problems locally, without any thought of crossing the waters. From time to time the art of swimming would be rediscovered. A student would come and the following exchange would take place:

"I want to swim to another land."

"For that you have to learn how to swim. Are you ready to learn?"

"Yes, but I want to take with me my ton of cabbages."

"What cabbages?"

"The food I'll need on the other side or whatever it is."

"But what if there's food on the other side?"

"I don't know what you mean. I'm not sure. I have to bring my cabbages with me."

"But you won't be able to swim with a ton of cabbages. It's too much weight."

"Then I can't learn how to swim. You call my cabbages weight. I call them my basic food."

-I. Shah, [The Sufi's](#)

It is hard letting go of our cabbages so we can discover new lands. Think of our cabbages as the way we currently think about organizations; our fixed ideas, suppositions or uncertainties. Is it possible we are unable to transform our organizations because we are unwilling to let go of our cabbages? How are we ever going to create a fundamentally different type of organization using the same thinking which created the existing organization in the first place?

We have been captured by the image of a learning organization, an organization which has the capacity to create its future; an organization which can create knowledge; an organization which can thrive in continuous change. Ironically, many of us have been trying to create this new form



of organization, unable to see the theories (paradigms, mental models or assumptions) we are using to make this change. Subsequently, we use the methods, tools, and models which reflect our current organizational thinking. For example, some see the concept of the learning organization as a mandate to increase training, or conduct process improvement teams or implement strategic planning. There is nothing wrong with these activities, but they won't create a new way of being in organizations. If you are trying to build a new organizational foundation, digging the same foundations deeper will not get you there. Tracy Goss, Richard Pascale, and Anthony Athos in their article "The Reinvention Roller Coaster: Risking the Present for a Powerful Future" site IBM as an example of an organization trying to change without changing a core assumption -- everything had to be done with control and predictability.

IBM was among the vanguard in employing most contemporary business techniques, such as pursuing Six Sigma quality, empowerment, delayering, and downsizing. But because IBM failed to alter its context - the 'IBM way' of controlling and predicting every aspect of the business - these change programs did not serve as steps to a powerful future.

Goss, Pascale, and Athos

Harvard Business Review, Nov.-Dec. 1993

This tacit underlying assumption inhibited IBM's ability to transform -- to create a new way of being in an organization. The inability to look at our core assumptions and beliefs prevent the kind of learning required for transformational change. We need to explore the theory rooting our current structures, practices and plans; only then can we build a new organization foundation.

We have been inhibiting our capacity to create learning organizations because we have been unable to develop a fundamental practice of a learning organization -- to look at how we look at things. We will not create learning organizations until we, individually and collectively, develop our capacity to surface and reflect on our thinking - to learn.

"It is the theory which decides what can be observed."

Albert Einstein

Before we start creating a whole lot of corporate thrusts to "become a learning organization", let's start by looking at how we look at organizations. How we look at organizations will influence what we do, what problems we see, and how we relate to them. With a different paradigm, we might solve an entirely different problem. With a different lens on organizations, we may envision a learning organization quite differently.

Organizations are the way they are because of the patterns of thought we hold about them. These patterns of thoughts are similar to DNA, they encode the characteristics of the organization; how it will structure, change, take action. Just as DNA encodes and transmits information to the next generation, our artifacts, language, the "way we do things around here",

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encode our belief sets and quietly transmit them to new organization members. How we interact with one another in organizations on the basis of these paradigms is what sustains them as they are.

Paradigms can be difficult to see directly but can be accessed through metaphor. It is the metaphor we use which provides a window into our paradigm. As you look through these windows, you will see the organization differently. (For additional insights see Gareth Morgan's book *Images of Organizations*.) Our intent is to provide you with an example of multiple images of the organization and how these images would affect the processes used for creating a learning organization. We hope you will see how the window through which you look changes how you will view learning in the organizations. After all, organizations are not things. We cannot touch or feel organizations, we can only make inferences through stories we tell about them. But, the image we use will shape our thinking, and ultimately these images shape what we come to believe as the "truth" about organizations. What we believe will shape our behavior in organizations.

What is the organizational theory which frames your lens on organizations?

Organizations are like machines...

The machine metaphor has been our dominant image of organizations in the Industrial Era. Corporations, government, churches have been designed in this image. The assumptions on which this image is built come from Newtonian science:

- We can know the whole by knowing the parts.
- We want our organization to run like clockwork.
- There is an objective, valueless reality which we can know.
- Through detached observation, we can know and subsequently control our world.
- Our work can be broken into discrete parts. This provides the maximum efficiency.

How does this translate for organizations? The pyramid organizational structure was designed for control through hierarchy. The division of functions was designed for efficiency. Learning in this paradigm is depositing existing knowledge. The focus is on technical assessment and training given by experts to teach skills required by the workforce to perform defined tasks.

This metaphor breaks in organizations trying to adjust to environments of radical and continuous change. Over the past several decades, others have been using the metaphor:

Organizations are like organisms...

This metaphor of organizations is sustained by open systems thinking. In open systems thinking reality is viewed as interdependent parts in which a change in one impacts all others. The assumptions are:

- The parts are organized into a whole.
- The organism adapts to an external reality (such as customer requirements)
- Alignment of the parts creates an effective whole system.
- There is an objective, valueless reality which we can know.
- Through detached observation, we can know and subsequently control our world.
- We can diagnose and treat problems.

In organizational terms, the pioneers of this metaphor understood the problems in organizations were occurring between functions. Functions separated by physical space and purpose were out of alignment with one another and with the customer's needs. To enhance organizational effectiveness, the parts of the organization (structure, skills, systems) need to be aligned so the organization can deliver operationally what it wants to become strategically.

Learning from this perspective is focused on understanding the linkages of the parts. Problem-solving, re-engineering and action research methodologies are the chief analytical tools. Ideally, learning takes place in cross-functional teams which study whole systems and design the system to align and support external needs.

While these images are useful, any metaphor has its limitations. Consider the logic sets about learning in the machine and organism images. Learning is the perpetuation of knowledge or more fully understanding what is "out there". Neither image works well to generate knowledge or to transform the organization. Both images are based on the physical world. Our focus is external, on that which we can see. We fix things "out there", when another critical leverage is recognizing the thinking that got us there in the first place. We are limited because we don't look below the concrete to examine the thinking, beliefs and assumptions which give form to matter.

What if we were to use a metaphor that is not tied to the physical realm? How might the theories and knowledge of quantum physics be used to reframe our image of organizations? What if the organization was like energy? What if the organization was a creative force? What

if the organization was like ch'i? What if the organization was like love? These may sound like far-fetched metaphors, but let's explore how they may enable one to think about organizations differently.

The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine.
James Jean, Astronomer, 1930

Let's explore a "non-physical" metaphor:

Organizations are like patterns of meaning...

In this image, there is an implicit assumption of no objective reality. The organization is the meaning we give it. Consider the stars in the sky. Have you seen the big dipper or the little dipper? It is not really there, it is a collection of stars we have been conditioned to see as a dipper. We have connected the stars with imaginary lines. Once we have drawn these imaginary lines, it becomes more difficult to see the collections of stars as anything else. Consider how this might apply to organizations. We make meaning in organizations, we have mentally drawn the lines between our collection of artifacts (buildings, policies, organization charts...) and events and we collectively give them meaning. In this metaphor one cannot be an "observer". Reality is value-laden, determined by the way one observes.

The universe is a joint product between the observer and the observed.
Teilhard deChardin

The new sciences have demonstrated this phenomena in many ways. For example, when they study light as particle, that is what they can see and measure. When they study light as wave, that is what they see and measure. They cannot measure particle and wave simultaneously. What they chose to measure determines what they will see. Think about this in organizational terms. We see what we measure, what we focus on, what we value.

In this metaphor, reality is socially constructed. We come to know the organization through dialogue. In other words, each perspective provides one view and the collection of these perspectives, when intermingled, create the shape of the organization.

The assumptions in this metaphor are:

- Reality is constantly changing and never fully knowable.
- The organization's purpose evolves through a dynamic interaction with the environment.
- Collective learning is based on multiple perspectives.

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- Order is created through shared meaning which coordinates action.
- Organizational continuity is sustained through processes not structures. The focus is on relationships and communication.

Discovery learning is the focus. Learning occurs through the conscious examination of the current reality, through examining assumptions and through the creation of shared understanding, by integrating diverse, multiple perspectives which generate new ways to look at the world. This particular lens supports the dynamics of transformational learning and is particularly well suited in knowledge creation, framing the inquiry and the creation of the learning organization.

The idea that we do not understand something until we have a picture in our heads is a by-product of the Newtonian way of looking at the world. If we want to get past Newton, we have to get past that.

Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*

So what do these images have to do with creating a learning organization? We need to understand that organizations are the way they are because of the patterns of thought we hold about them. And the image used will influence what we do, what problems we see, how we fix them and how we behave. How we interact with one another in an organization on the basis of these paradigms is what sustains them as they are. We will continue to perpetuate organizations as they are until we change our paradigm. Wherein lies the paradox. We have been trying to create learning organizations without seeing the assumptions which root our practices. If we limit learning to perpetuating existing knowledge, we are limited to changing what is, versus creating what isn't. If we want to expand our capacity to learn as organizations, we need to explore a new way of imaging organizations. A place to start is in exploring our theories.

...creating a new theory is not like destroying an old barn and erecting a skyscraper in its place. It is rather like climbing a mountain, gaining new and wider views...

Albert Einstein, *The Evolution of Physics*

Maybe the way to deal with this paradox is not to try to create anything at all. Instead, we could focus our energies on getting conscious (individually and collectively) about what we are doing and what we believe. Without really trying to *create* a learning organization, we have already begun the journey.

Ginny Belden-Charles specialize in helping leaders and groups uncover limiting assumptions and discover new possibilities for growth and strategic change.