



# Learning in Organisations



# Why this content might be relevant

- You are interested in developing a learning organisation
- You would like to learn more about how learning in an organisation is promoted or what people do to hinder learning
- You would like to explore how good leadership and governance practices can enable learning and change

# Organisational learning and learning organisations

- There is a difference between organisational learning and learning organisations
- Learning organisation - this is a specific idea which relates to concepts and actions which create an organisation that is able to learn, adapt and change
- Organisational learning – relates to the processes involved in individual , group and collective learning within an organisation

# Part One

## Developing a learning organisation

# *Learning Organisation* definitions

Definitions vary :

- *"Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the 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 to learn together"* (Peter Senge, 1990)
- *"A Learning Company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself"* (M. Pedler, J. Burgoyne and Tom Boydell, 1991)

# The contribution of Senge (1990)

Senge suggested the use of five “component technologies” to create a learning organisation:

- Systems thinking
- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- Shared vision, and
- Team learning

# Contribution of Garvin et al (2008)

- Current thinking goes beyond Senge's original ideas:
- Developing a learning organisation requires going beyond attending to the culture and processes of an organisations and linking it to structures, practices, and how work is organised
- This should be done in conjunction with other changes which might relate to new activities

# Building Blocks of the learning organisation

From Garvin, Edmondson and Gino (Harvard Business Review 2008)

- A supportive learning environment
- Concrete learning processes and practices, and
- Leadership behaviour that provides reinforcement for these



# 1) A supportive learning environment

Provides:

- Psychological safety
- Appreciation of differences
- Openness to new ideas
- Time for reflection

From Garvin et al HBR 2008



## 2) Concrete learning processes and practices

Learning processes involve the:

- Generation, collection, interpretation and dissemination of information
- Experimentation to test new ideas
- Keeping track of trends (where relevant)
- Review after specific projects
- Education and training to develop new and established staff

From Garvin et al HBR 2008



# 3) Leadership to reinforce learning

Organisational learning is strongly influenced by leaders' behaviour:

- Active questioning and listening of employees to prompt dialogue and debate
- Signal importance of learning activities
- Willingness to entertain alternative points of view

From Garvin et al HBR 2008



# Some pointers for creating a successful learning organisation

- Leadership alone is insufficient
- Organisations are not monolithic
- Comparative performance is key
- Learning is multi-dimensional

# Summary:

## what does a learning culture look like?

It:

- Enables and encourages skills development
- Encourages free-flowing exchanges of information
- People listen and challenge each other, even across hierarchies
- It is a place where looking across the boundaries and networking is encouraged
- It provides an environment where people can experiment, take considered risks and not be punished for making mistakes
- Failure is tolerated if lessons are learned

# Part Two

## How learning itself is helped and hindered

# Despite our good intentions...

We often find learning and change difficult

*A learning system... must be one in which dynamic conservatism operates at such a level and in such a way as to permit change of state without intolerable threat to the essential functions the system fulfils for the self. Our systems need to maintain their identity, and their ability to support the self-identity of those who belong to them, but they must at the same time be capable of transforming themselves. (Schön 1973: 570)*

# It isn't always easy to learn and change

- Hirschhorn 'primary risk'— when the perceived learning and change required is so great as to pose a risk to survival. This is the case in turbulent environments, where the usual rules and individual adaptive routines no longer work. The social field is unpredictable. To learn and adapt, new behaviour is required. While this feels dangerous it is also the space which allows change to occur.

# So, what influences take up of learning?

Perceptions of:

- Relative advantage – is it better for me to do this, than to stay with current options?
- Compatibility – how compatible is this with the my views, beliefs and values?
- Complexity – how hard or easy is this to understand?
- Trialability – how easy or hard is this to put into place? High cost/Low cost/no cost/ How much risk?
- Observability – how tangible are the benefits to those taking it up and other stakeholders?

**Here, the main mechanism is rational choice – based on ‘seeing the benefits’**

# But learning systems are:

- Subject to political, cultural, psychodynamic forces that demand compliance and create fads and fashions
- Structurally highly interconnected and disconnected
- Themselves are artefacts and symbols of a time and place – value fades and decay as “laggards” join in and rejection of the innovation becomes ‘the new black’.

So individuals and groups may try ‘to deny it, to escape it or to become oblivious to it [change]’ (Schön 1971 p.28) by engaging in **maladaptive strategies**.

# Maladaptive strategies

TIHR Anthologies Volume 3

Emery and Trist classify contexts (Environments) as simple/complex, stable/dynamic:

**Maladaptive Strategies** – are the efforts made by individuals and groups to reduce relevant uncertainty and simplify choices but which actually lessen the prospects of reducing uncertainties. (Emery 1976)

In a **turbulent** environment (where boundaries between entities are not clear): relationships form; change and die rapidly; and no agent(s) can shape the context.

This creates:

UNPREDICTABILITY → HIGH UNCERTAINTY →  
ANXIETY/fear of LOSS of SELF

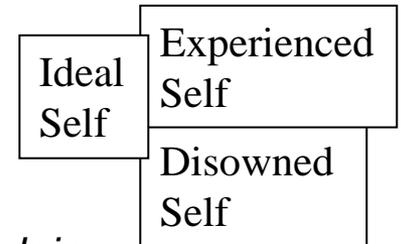


# 'Choice Simplifying' Maladaptive Strategies

- **Passive maladaptations:** characterised by superficiality, segmentation, dissociation i.e where system starts to disintegrate leading to loss/denial of context and purpose. e.g members of an orchestra start playing their own tunes – or stop playing altogether. (a group response)
- **Active maladaptations:** fundamentalism, authoritarianism, evangelism i.e exaggerations of responses that were useful in other environment / contexts. Conductor waves baton frantically. (= Leader response)

# What helps and hinders learning: shame

- Shame is linked to identity and is “a sense of inadequacy of the self, of not being up to the task or of being defective”.
- People shut up when things aren’t going well. Shame motivates the need to hide one's vulnerabilities and learning may be inhibited.
- We tend to avoid talking about that which is shameful to us



The Presence of Organisational Shame is indicated by statements of:

- Contempt: *It is always like this here. They don't know what they're doing*
- Anger/ humiliation: *Its embarrassing (to be in the same room as you). You let us down*
- Denial/ emphasis on ordinariness: *Its just a hiccough. We saw it coming*

Shame anxiety is: a feeling of felt inadequacy in the face of task demands, an inability to talk about it, and a sense that real failure may in fact occur

A change and consulting task *is to help organisational participants redefine and reshape their identity as one that is adequate to the challenges they face*

(from Sue Whittle, P3C 2012)

# Organisational defensive routines

- Defensive routines - the policies or actions we put in place to prevent ourselves and our organizations from experiencing embarrassment or threat. The unintended consequence of these defensive routines is that they also prevent anyone from identifying them and thereby they reduce the causes of the embarrassment or threat.

(Argyris and Schön)

# Examples of defensive routines

- People advocate views without encouraging inquiry (hence, remain in unilateral control and hopefully win)
- Unilaterally save face - your own and other people's (hence, minimize upsetting others or making them defensive);
- Design and manage situations unilaterally (in order to maintain control);
- Evaluate the thoughts and actions of others in ways that do not encourage testing the validity of the evaluation (and our own thoughts and actions);
- Attribute causes for whatever we are trying to understand - without necessarily validating them;
- Engage in defensive actions such as blaming, stereotyping, and intellectualizing to suppress feelings

# Questions to ask of your school

- To what extent is your school functioning as a learning organisation?
- What are the factors which affect learning in your school?
- What is supporting or hindering learning and what could you do to create change?
- What would you need to emphasise to create a learning organisation?

You could ask yourself these questions and create a plan for change

After Garvin et al (2008) HBR survey tool

