

WATKINS CONSULTING GROUP



Linda J. Watkins, PhD
220 Newport Center Drive #11-204
Newport Beach, CA 92660
888 721-0873
949 721-0873
949 721-0880 fax
www.watkinsconsultinggroup.com

Getting a Handle on Organizational Learning

Can organizations learn? This question is central to the latest work and research in the field of organizational dynamics. Peter Senge popularized the concept of the learning organization with his famous book, *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Science of the Learning Organization*. Since the publication of the book in 1991 practitioners and scholars have been experimenting with theories and methods to achieve that idealized organization. Scholars have found that it has been very difficult to achieve in practice.

Senge's book is an amalgam of the work on single- and double-loop learning by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, Jay Forrester's research at MIT on systems dynamics and the experience of Royal Dutch Shell with their scenario planning. His concept includes different theories and processes of communication. With a history in the field of human relations/OD, it is uniquely flavored by American business culture, hence the name, organizational learning. Asian cultures already have a preference for holistic thinking regarding problems and group learning as opposed to the traditional specialist and individualist approach of the United States.

Organizational learning is an evolution from a focus on individual learning to enhancing group and organizational action. Beginning globalization, the need for adaptability to change and new ways of detecting and correcting errors created an environmental push for a change in the way organizations and employees are viewed. While the quality/continuous improvement movement focuses on improving business processes and products,

organizational learning focuses on improving communication and group processes and joining together organizational history and future.

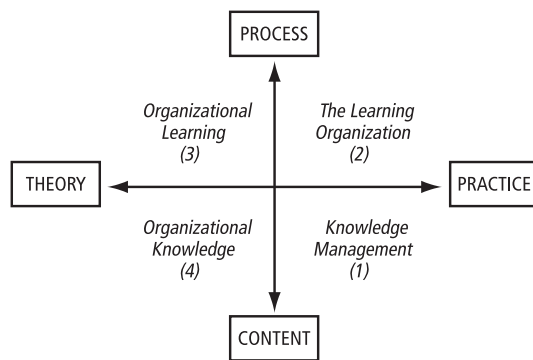
To date and primarily in the United States, organizational learning encompasses a list of activities conducive to producing continuous learning in an organization. Dialogue, systems thinking, shared visioning, challenging mental models, team learning, action learning or learning on the job, scenario planning and double-loop learning are some of the major activities or processes mentioned in organizational learning literature.

The Society for Organizational Learning (SOL) founded by Senge and others has a large, eclectic list of topics and processes that are thought to be included in

organizational and environmental systems, processes and problems.

Clearly the SOL view of organizational learning is a social and human relations perspective. There is also a technical perspective that includes the field and data systems of knowledge management. Knowledge management is the terminology describing the technological and systematic ways of gathering, transferring and storing the knowledge and experience of employees.

Mark Easterby-Smith's and Marjorie Lyles's graphic mapping of key topics shows the relationship between four concepts of the field.



Smith's and Lyles's map delineates the difference between organizational learning, the learning organization, organizational knowledge and knowledge management based on two axis, process content and theory but also practice. They explain organizational knowledge as primarily tacit explicit knowledge that is contained in the organization; core competencies, for example.

- (1) Knowledge management refers primarily to the technological systems for capturing and storing knowledge.
- (2) A learning organization is an idealized view of what an organization looks like when focused on learning.
- (3) Organizational learning refers to the learning processes within an organization.
- (4) Organizational knowledge refers to that body of information unique to and held within the organization.

Current areas of interest and research in the field of organizational learning are the political or self-protective aspects of organization that may thwart learning, such as, mistrust and hiding or hoarding information. Building trust and establishing transparency are methods for counteracting the limiting factors of organization.

Language is an area of interest as well. Chris Argyris's work with challenging assumptions and internal and external dialogue as the basis of double-loop learning in many ways began an awareness of organizational learning. However, work in the area of communities of practice has delineated professional and technical languages intrinsic to communities of practice, and work with speech acts and meaning-making has looked at other aspects of language and learning. Robert Kegan's and Lisa Lahey's research with changing language to change work explores internal languages and social languages that hinder or help our learning.

There are many definitions of organizational learning, some focusing on individual learning within the organization, some on subgroup or team learning and some on a collective mind. Yet, most refer to adaptive behavior or improving actions or action outcomes.

With that foundation, an organization can be said to be learning if there is a collective change in behavior due to commonly understood new information or adapted knowledge.

© 2006 Watkins Consulting Group