



E.C.L.O.

European Consortium for the Learning Organisation

The E-Learner

The Editor for September 2008 is Anders Örtenblad (Halmstad University School of Business & Engineering, Sweden)

What do the ECLO members have in common?

I would like to know what it is that unites all the members of ECLO. An interest in the learning organization? Well, that could be it. But since there are so many different definitions of the learning organization, it seems not very likely that all of us are interested in the same topics. In a study of what authors on the learning organization claim that Senge mean by a “learning organization”, I found as many as 12 different interpretations. It is probably the label that unites us. My own interest is mainly in the concept as such. I think it is amazing that such a vague and ambiguous idea such as the learning organization has become popular. On the other hand, it would probably not have become so popular if it had been more clearly defined what a learning organization is.

Is learning positive, negative or neutral?

I think that many, perhaps most of us, take it for granted that learning is something positive. The more learning the better. However, people could learn to do evil things. I would not like anyone to learn how to produce nuclear weapons, for instance, or how to seduce customers to buy things that they don't really need.

Who needs learning organizations?

It could be questioned whether all organizations should become learning organizations, which much of the popular literature suggests. It depends, of course, on how the idea is defined. But it also depends on which type of organization that is at stake. It could, for instance, be discussed whether bureaucratic organizations – such as hospitals, car manufacturers, universities and accountancy firms – should adopt the flexible and decentralized, almost organic structure, that much literature claim that a learning organization has. It could also be discussed whether it is a good idea to implement the learning organization, from other perspectives than the managerial. Perhaps a learning organization would make a specific organization more efficient or even effective, but would that necessarily also mean that it is a better place to work at, for the staff? And is it a good idea from a societal point of view, that many or even all organizations become learning organizations?

Adaptation of the LO concept to different contexts

Many have argued that the learning organization is a general idea that could not be adopted as is. To the contrary, each organization needs to create and implement its own version of the idea. These authors do not, however, suggest how the idea should be adapted in order to fit to the specific industry, culture and religion. If anyone could change the content as it prefers to them, then the idea runs the risk of getting unserious. It comes to mean everything and nothing. Anyone could claim that their organization is a learning organization. It could therefore be a good idea to specify the changes that the idea would have to undergo in order to fit in different contexts. There is already some research in this area, and more will come. I see this as one of the main research topics for the future, in the learning organization area. I am currently working with a special issue of International Journal of Learning and Change, in which papers regarding this issue will be published.

Much of the previous research has been focused on adapting the idea to different contexts in Asia. It could also, though, be interesting to study how this originally Anglo-Saxon idea needs to be adapted in order to fit into different parts of Europe. Should, for instance, a Finnish learning organization look exactly like the Portuguese or the Turkish learning organization? There is also a lot work yet to be done, regarding the adaptation of the idea to different industries.

A theme for ECLO conferences

I think that an interesting theme for a conference would be that which I discussed above, namely the need to adapt the idea of the learning organization to different contexts. It seems to be a topic of interest both to academics and the so called “practitioners” (I am not very fond of that word). I think we could get a journal to publish another special issue on this topic, with papers from the conference. Perhaps we could ask The Learning Organization (TLO). Both academics and “practitioners” could present papers at the conference. But to interest an academic journal such as TLO, the papers for the special issue would have to be academic. However, “practitioners” could perhaps shortly comment on the academic papers. These comments could perhaps be published together with the academic papers.

ECLO’s debating site

Could some kind of chat-site be arranged where we could debate these and other issues continuously?

If anyone would like to share their views on these topics, please feel free to get in touch with me at [anders.ortenblad@hh.se]

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