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# A business school as a learning organization

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## Abstract

Brings up and examines the concept of a business school as a learning organization. Discusses the issue of change as a stimulus to learning – as businesses face new challenges, so, therefore, do business schools – hence the necessity to become a learning organization. Proposes the idea of the faculty member as the learner, as well as the integration of various modes of organizational learning: faculty group discipline-based learning, cross-disciplinary programme-based learning, and learning via a “partnership” with a major customer organization. Illustrates a working model for organizational learning comprising learning from research activities, workshops/“discovery events”, open teaching programmes as well as in-company tailored programmes. The total of this – when aggregated as it relates to all the major learning partnerships the school is involved in – leads to acquisition of knowledge by the faculty and the business school becomes a deliberate organizational learner. Concludes with emphasis on partnerships with multinational cutting-edge firms as the key to the most relevant real-life organizational learning.

## Introduction

In this article, we shall discuss how organizational learning can take place as an integral part of the strategic development within a business school. While some emphasis has been put on how the business school can establish a learning partnership with a company[1,2], little or no emphasis has been put so far on how the business school itself can be seen as a learning organization, although recent research on university administration is starting to focus on this[3]. The case we shall focus on is IMD – International Institute for Management Development – a graduate school of business specializing in executive development, located in Lausanne, Switzerland. This self-owned, not-for-profit institution is 50 years old, and has a faculty of approximately 40 full-time professors, complemented by a support staff of approximately 120, the total staff representing 28 nationalities. Approximately 4,000 students of 61 different nationalities participated in IMD’s various learning activities in 1995, both open enrolment and tailor-made in-company programmes, ranging from the shortest three-day programmes to the one-year MBA. The institute also has a small MBA programme (it represents less than 10 per cent of the turnover of the organization), and compared with most MBA programmes it, too, tends to receive somewhat older executives as students.

As IMD puts most of its emphasis on executive development, there is consequently a rather atypical one-dimensional academic value-creation focus at IMD. Typically, most business schools will have a much broader set of programme activities as a basis for their academic value-creation. This added complexity typically may mean diversity in subcultures, multiple disciplinary focuses, more sources of impulses from various types of students-cum-customers, etc. One might indeed expect that organizational learning would be much more difficult in such normal but more diverse settings. Certainly, the unifying perspective of IMD’s executive development focus is likely to be a factor that might facilitate organizational learning within IMD.

A factor that might add complexity to IMD’s organizational learning, on the other hand, is the very fact that the school is perhaps the most international of any of the

leading business schools. This means that much organizational learning will have to integrate rather complex multicountry and comparative culture perspectives.

### Learning and change

Both at the individual and organizational levels, learning has to be inspired by change, i.e. driven by the fact that critical factors in one's individual and/or organizational environment are now typically changing, and often at a dramatic rate. More than anything else, one might perhaps say that change, as a phenomenon, represents the very rationale for the necessity to learn. In an entirely stable world, learning would be largely a luxury which one would not necessarily have to pursue systematically, and certainly not one on which to spend organizational resources extensively. With rapid change in one's environment, however, the risk of becoming obsolete – of no longer being relevant to one's customers – is indeed real; clearly, rapid change leads to strong pressure to learn, for both individuals and organizations.

When it comes to the way in which executive development is handled in many business organizations, with them themselves exposed to very rapid changes, companies are increasingly coming to the conclusion that the “last remaining source of competitive advantage” can be found only in “investing” in the improvement of their organizations. This can be achieved in many ways, one of which is the periodic education of their executives on the latest, most relevant managerial issues, in order that they may work more effectively in complex and dynamically changing settings. The need to reinvest continuously in one's organization therefore tends to be apparent to most.

All of this accumulated focus on the customers' change agendas will, of course, also lead to strong pressure for change on a business school that focuses on executive development, such as IMD. When it comes to the substance of one's research, programme development, and programme delivery, it must reflect this rapidly changing agenda. In addition, given the growing need to learn on the job by linking education more specifically to the various strategic challenges and actions that executives face, the mastery of new and rapidly evolving types of learning methodology, including distance learning, also becomes

essential. All of this means more change facing the business school, and thus also a need for the business school itself to become a more effective learning organization.

Herewith, we shall propose that a business school can become a learning organization by deliberately pursuing – or at least informally allowing for – four complementary types of learning:

- (1) Individual discipline-based faculty learning, leading to an accumulated learning effect that, perhaps, we might label organizational learning.
- (2) Discipline-based teams of faculty learning together – thus, indeed, a form of organizational learning.
- (3) Teams of faculty learning around specific academic programmes – thus allowing for a cross-disciplinary organizational learning competence to develop.
- (4) Full-fledged faculty team learning with the business school's customer organizations, based on the accumulated learning effects from such learning partnerships.

### The faculty member as learner

At the level of individual faculty members, a great deal of faculty learning has traditionally taken place, especially in order to stay abreast of the advances in their respective fields. Individual learning, based on traditional modes of scientific discovery, is at the heart of most faculty members' concern. Individual research has been the predominant force behind this learning. Achievement of this type of learning is complicated, since it follows logically from the *raison d'être* of most academicians' choice of career. The aggregate effect of all this may be seen as some form of non-directed organizational learning. Individual, research-based learning can, however, often be difficult to achieve to its fullest, owing to a multitude of centrifugal forces that typically drain a faculty member's individual energy. Thereby, the resulting organizational learning might also be limited. Intensive teaching loads, endless meetings, compliance with excessive bureaucratic norms, and other “distinctions”, can easily eat away the time and energy for research – above all because free blocks of time for research and learning may be lacking. Entrenched conservative organizational practices, such as the so-called tenure system, might also diminish learning.

Basically, this process may, on the one hand, lead young academicians to work on established, “safe” research items in order to secure disciplinary success, but which might also easily limit their relevant real-life learning. Furthermore, professors with tenure might be tempted to slow down, or at least pay less attention to, shifting disciplinary factors in order to stay up to speed in their fields. Conservative ivory-tower behaviour might result. The often steep hierarchical nature of academic organizations, with different roles and privileges at full professor level versus the associate and assistant professor levels, might further slow down balanced individual faculty learning.

External activities, such as outside consulting, may also eventually compete with systematic individual academic learning. There can be many temptations here, and strong discipline will be needed in order to avoid being trapped in consulting activities that do not lead to learning.

One is often, therefore, not free to develop an academic value-based activity agenda that might better reflect the needs of today’s environment. Since change and learning go together, it goes without saying that a highly solidified discipline-based academic culture, perhaps coupled with a highly formalized inflexible organizational structure, does not necessarily foster a stronger learning focus.

Needless to say, however, despite all of that, there are many ways for individual faculty members to learn, both from their teaching activities, their research, and from outside consulting.

Individual learning in academia is, after all, a highly personalized matter. When the day is over, it requires individual determination, discipline, and commitment to make sure that one continues to learn and develop as an individual faculty member. The various centrifugal forces mentioned above often lead to difficult trade-offs and dilemmas, and can be resolved only by each faculty member alone, taking responsibility for the ongoing learning agenda. The academic institution can, of course, help and support faculty members in their efforts to maintain their effective learning agendas, say, through annual planning meetings where one reviews one’s own research and pedagogical progress. Still, it is only through the faculty member’s own self-referencing that fundamental individual learning can take place. This individual

learning will be the backbone for all forms of organizational learning, too, by resulting in an organizational accumulation of learning – and providing the basis for more deliberate forms of organizational learning.

### **Discipline-based organizational learning**

In order to cope with the substantial changes that confront businesses and business schools, how does organizational learning take place at the business school/institutional level? Institutional learning, or organizational learning, of course, implies that more than one person is involved, so that things can be learned together, as a team. Organizational learning does, therefore, imply that there is a common body of learning which takes place beyond the accumulation of purely individual learning. Traditionally, as pointed out, the value-creating activities in an academic institution tend to be focused on academic disciplines. This might lend itself to organizational learning around a discipline-based “cluster” of colleagues with similar academic backgrounds. There might be a group of marketing professors, for instance, who, to a greater or lesser extent, might collaborate on certain marketing-related research projects. Typically, the members of this group might also be asked to offer the various marketing-related academic courses or modules in the teaching curricula. Consequently, organizational learning often tends to be based on clusters of professors with the same shared disciplines. This can be seen as very attractive from the point of view of the individual faculty member, who can thereby continue to build on the in-depth individual in-focused learning he/she is already undertaking, but now linking it up with fellow academicians around a particular discipline. Positive effects might include the increased ability to develop publishable articles, particularly given that most leading academic journals tend to be discipline-based.

Tightly coupled and further strengthened discipline-based organizational learning might, however, also lead to a certain narrowness in the organizational learning that takes place, and thus to potential problems. It can be particularly difficult to reach a meaningful trade-off between learning about the concerns for real-life issues versus narrower, often abstract, disciplinary learning. The change exposure for a faculty member from a disciplinary perspective may be partial and artificially

segmented, thereby also creating partial organizational learning. Executives do not necessarily think and act in terms of disciplines such as marketing, manufacturing, finance, etc. Rather, they find it natural to think, decide and operate in an integrated mode, bringing the various discipline-based pieces of knowledge together, i.e. a general management focus. They will thus tend to provide rather holistic change signals which might, however, not necessarily be easy to “catch” for faculty members who operate in a strongly fragmented, discipline-based environment. We might thus see a discrepancy between organizational learning in a discipline-based world and what takes place within the realities of a real-life organization. This resulting unrealistic organizational learning can represent a stressful dilemma for individual faculty members who might prefer discipline-based learning only in an ideal static world!

### **Programme-based organizational learning**

For the more practitioner-oriented organizational learning dimension to be strengthened, to counterbalance unilateral discipline-based organizational learning, many academic administrators have been grappling with more or less effective ways to establish a new balance. How can an added organizational learning dimension be achieved to add real-life relevance to organizational learning in a business school setting? One good way of doing this is perhaps to introduce a broadened appearance of newer, cross-disciplinary academic programmes – with, say, an international focus as well, which then might legitimize the establishment of teams of faculty members to offer cross-discipline-based teaching programmes. Over time, through such real-life-based teaching programmes, which are particularly necessary and appropriate in executive development settings, and perhaps more so for tailored, in-company teaching programmes, one might establish faculty learning clusters based on cross-disciplinary teaching knowledge. Such organizational learning in more cross-disciplinary, complex-context, teaching-based/focused clusters might help to establish a new balance between practical relevance and disciplinary knowledge in business schools.

As we have argued, organizational learning implies that knowledge emerges from interaction among members of an organization, in this case the business school’s faculty members. Traditionally, as pointed out, this interaction has tended to be discipline-based, where the “rules” for interaction have been dictated by what makes sense for advancing the knowledge in the given discipline. To complement this, however, we can see interaction among teams of people around more applied topics, often of a more practical nature, where the “rules” for interaction may have more to do with how to achieve relevance *vis-à-vis* student/customer groups who must comprehend the more practical topic at hand. For all types of organizational learning, it is thus important that the faculty members be connected in clusters, and that they have open minds and the will to share an understanding regarding the common knowledge within this cluster. Only through such shared understanding will the necessary organizational learning be meaningful, and manifest itself in organizational action such as better programmes, better research output, etc.

### **The business school’s customers/ learning partners shaping the learning organization**

As a result of multinational, cross-cultural teams, today’s companies are increasingly seeing opportunities in a global context, mobilizing the global organization in an effective, flexible way to seize opportunities, etc. Their needs for learning to meet the changes they face are thus primarily multidiscipline-based: global general management with a strategic action-oriented focus. This means that it will also be increasingly important for the academic institution to be clear about “how to face its new customer environment”, i.e. how to pick up and comprehend the incoming change signals from these types of global complex companies. Increasingly, these change signals will have to be seen through an *integrated understanding* of the new *customer organizations* one is serving, rather than merely to focus on the individual customers/executives/students who participate in given programmes, and/or specific free-standing programmes they might ask for. One increasingly needs to know where these executives come from and what types of organizational learning context they are part of. Above all, what

types of organizational learning focus must be strengthened to meet the needs from a company's vision and objectives? These types of change and learning stimulus represent particularly far cries from the classical individual faculty member's change stimuli that, as discussed, primarily came from fellow academicians, reflecting the changes in discipline-based discovery processes that took place within the various functional academic fields. Although perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, it also represents a difference between the change and learning stimuli that faculty members might get from working together in more practitioner-oriented teaching clusters.

We thus now see a range of organizational learning activities in academic institutions. At one extreme, we find the aggregation of unrelated individual faculty members' learning efforts. In the middle, we find organizational learning in clusters of discipline-based faculty members, and organizational learning in cross-disciplinary, eclectic teaching programme-based faculty clusters. At the other extreme, we find clusters of academicians learning from a given customer organization-cum-learning partner. The focus of organizational learning shifts when one goes from one step to the other. This can be a source of potential stress among the members of a business school staff when attempting to reconcile various types of organizational learning aspects – ranging from disciplinary to the practical demands of the complex global organization.

Does it matter whether there is harmony or conflict between discipline-focused organizational learning and more practitioner-focused organizational learning? For an individual faculty member, this potential conflict between the various organizational learning focuses within the school of which he is a member may present difficulties. For instance, is the urge for discipline-based learning to stay on top of one's field reconcilable with the more practitioner-oriented learning of which one may have to be part to provide teaching and/or research programmes to serve the demands of leading clients? A business school's criteria for feedback evaluation, promotion and/or granting of tenure to individual faculty members might have to be modified to be consistent with the shift of balance in the organizational learning. If not, it may be difficult for the individual to

reconcile the demands for organizational learning with his own professional agenda.

We also see another important implication from this potential shift in the balancing of organizational learning focus, namely that also the borderlines between the business school as an organization, and what will be its dominant environment, will shift. In the business school's classical organizational learning situation, one could say that the broader organizational context might be through network relationships with fellow academicians, scholastic journals, academic conference participation, etc. When it comes to the teaching-programme-based business school, the organizational boundaries will be shaped relatively more by network relationships with customer groups, such as human resource management contacts, alumni groups, professional organizations, etc. Finally, however, when it comes to the customer organization-focused business school, the boundaries and network relations will be shaped more by the specific customer organizations-cum-learning partners themselves. Increasingly, it may indeed be difficult to distinguish between the organizational learning that goes on in the business school, and the organizational learning that goes on in the customer organization! Both entities are change partners, and therefore learning partners, in making the customer organization's strategy work better.

### **Operationalizing the business school: client learning partnership-based learning**

Today, with many more changes in the way in which value must be created, there is, as we have noted, an increasing need to tip the balance towards relatively more practical relevance-driven organizational learning. This inevitably calls for a different type of approach for the business school to meet customer needs. With modern executive education being a business school's main "product", then what type of organizational learning is called for at the business school? How can institutional actions, routines, and measures be put in place to provide for appropriate organizational learning within a business school to allow it realistically to become a learning partner with leading companies? What are the new implementational challenges?

The answer probably starts with developing a more deliberate identification of firms from which one can truly learn, and to develop relationships with these more powerful, state-of-the-art customers, who *are* the proponents of change – typically, the leading multinational firms. Only through such strong learning partnerships can there be enough pressure on the faculty to pick up fully this type of organizational learning. Hence, we see the importance of more full-blown learning partnerships between the business school as a learning organization and leading firms as learning organizations.

We have previously presented a model for conceptualizing a business school's major client companies as learning organizations in learning partnerships with the business school[1]. Figure 1 gives such a learning model.

The “menu” for learning in Figure 1 will have to be determined by the context, based on the strategic agenda of the given company in question. An important aspect of this is that learning is not synonymous with course-based, acquisitional knowledge only. This approach claims that learning can probably take place best when we have an interface with a more open-minded search for new knowledge, based on stimulating the curiosity of the members of the organization to “make good even better” (see the vertical arrows of Figure 1). Here, co-operative research in particular, can play an important role, and the interactive, co-operative efforts between members of the client organization and the school's academic staff will be key. Similarly, workshops where the implications for various companies from research findings are presented and

discussed will probably be another useful source for generating open-mindedness to learning and respect for new knowledge. Such discovery events will not only expose the learning executives to new research, but will also imply significant live benchmarking *vis-à-vis* other companies in terms of how various organizations in different settings internalize the research findings.

The course-based learning activities are captured by the horizontal arrows of Figure 1. These might consist partly of open programmes, chosen on the basis of their ability to support the particular strategic agenda for the client at hand, and partly of tailored in-company programmes that support the strategic agenda directly. All programmes can probably be most effective if teams of executives attend, so that the learning is more broadly anchored in the organization, rather than being invested in solo individuals alone who can easily be “rejected” by the rest of the organization when they come back with their personal experiences. A positive aspect of learning in open programmes is, of course, that one learns much from executives from other organizations and from all over the world, i.e. a complement to tailored learning where the organizational culture will have to be more inward-focused.

For the business school as a learning organization, it will be important to try to develop a deliberate set of several learning partner/client relationships, so that the *aggregate* pattern of learning for the business school is meaningful. Figure 2 is an attempt to draw a picture of such an aggregate pattern based on a number of learning partner relationships with individual companies. Several important questions arise from this.

The overall pattern of research in this type of business school-cum-learning organization is driven by the types of research activities undertaken with the various client relationships. The aim would be that the aggregate picture provides some order and logic, so that the various research interactions with individual clients can lead to an overall logic in the way in which knowledge is being developed in the business school as a whole. It is, of course, critical to try to influence the *choice* of learning partner companies in such a way that an overall research logic does indeed develop. This could manifest itself in terms of know-how clusters of faculty members around important issues of joint interest to several

Figure 1 A menu of organizational learning at a learning partner

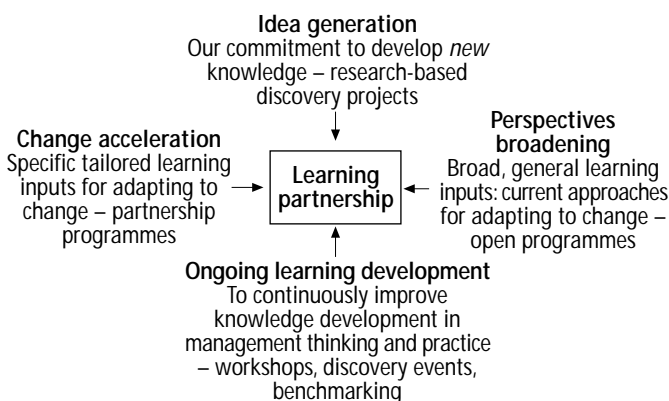
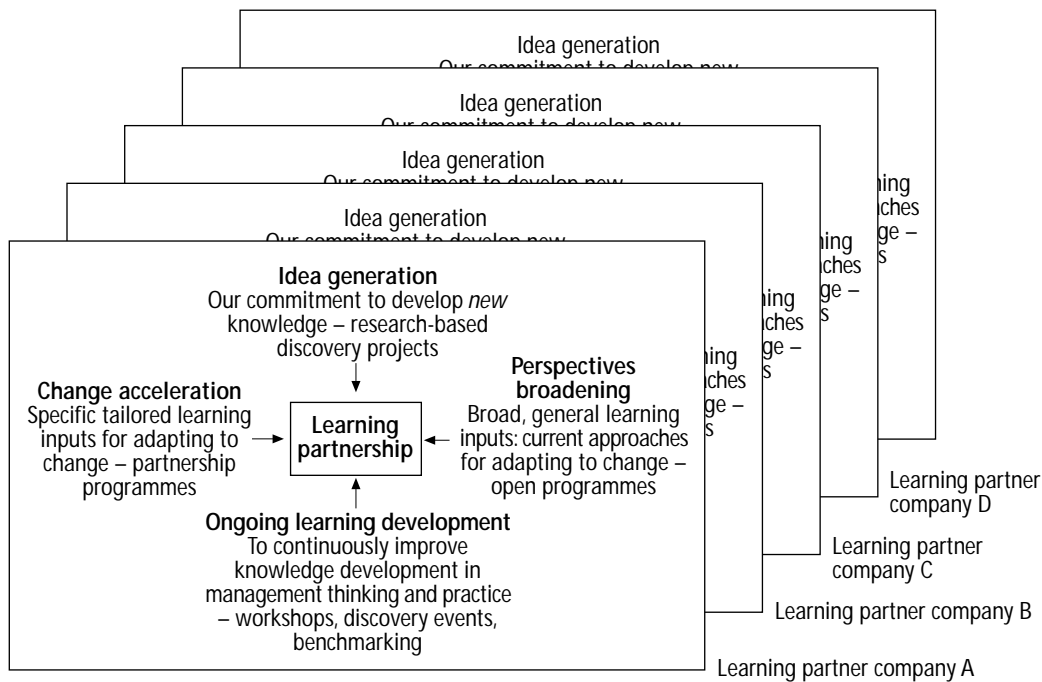


Figure 2 An aggregated pattern of learning partnerships



client companies. This strengthened learning organization focus will thus be based on the aggregate effects from the research dimension across a set of key client organizations.

In practice, many business schools have taken on relationships with clients based on teaching needs as the key driver. Learning from the collaborative research side has been seen as very incidental, or even totally neglected. The problem with this is that, if the clustering of research interests and knowledge build-up is not considered as part of the choice of specific client/customer relationships, it is difficult to develop a meaningful accumulation of research-based knowledge. Furthermore, since it is the research-based organizational learning dimension that, above all, lends focus to the organization, lack of deliberate organizational learning focus here is likely to lead to disjointed organizational learning for the business school – it may be “pulled apart” by the diverse input from its learning partners, not pulled together!

The aggregate learning partner model should thus ideally lead to four complementary sets of learning organization focuses at the business school, but where the research dimension should be the main driver for choice of learning partner companies:

- *Research activities.* The research activities would be based on those agenda items in which each particular chosen firm is most

interested, and of course matched with the research issues in which the faculty is interested, typically a faculty research interest cluster. Needless to say, there will have to be self-referencing among the faculty, leading to dialogue with key client companies on various research options, which might lead to a reconciliation regarding what makes sense as research topics, both from the faculty’s and from the client organization’s point of view. Thus, an organizational learning effect can be created both at the business school and at the client organization. Parallel consideration must also be given to a prospective partner firm’s interest in contributing to the other three learning focuses, too.

- *Discovery event patterns.* Here again, it is hoped that the research will lead to the organization of various types of discovery event where the participating companies can get together and learn from one another as they consider the research that has been generated. Here, the task will be same as for research, namely to develop meaningful patterns of knowledge focuses which can be discussed and be expanded with the clients, based on underlying joint client interests.
- *The portfolio of open teaching programmes.* Very often teaching programmes tend to be offered according to tradition, individual

faculty initiatives, trends and expectations of “normal” business school offerings, etc. From a customer-cum-learning partner relationship standpoint, the question *should* be: what types of open programmes would best cover the needs of the majority of the learning partner clients’ executives? The open programme portfolio would thus be structured according to what the companies need, probably being more heavily focused on state-of-the-art general management programmes, where the benefit from interacting with other firms would be particularly strong.

- *In-company tailored programmes.* Again, it would be important that the tailored in-company programmes should reflect the specific strategic needs of each major client, and also have some set of clustering features attached to them, so that the experience to the business school, as captured in the various teaching activities, can lead to a build-up of organizational learning.

All in all, one sees an entirely different activity pattern for academic value-creation in such a customer-driven business school: choice of research based on what the leading companies truly need, disseminated and expanded, including its development into managerially accessible materials through a set of research-based discovery events. This would be coupled with a set of general management open programmes which would all be renewed on a more aggressive basis, following the knowledge stemming from the ongoing research. Finally, this would also be coupled with in-company programmes tailored to the specific organizations to accelerate the given strategies, again based on heavy input from the research. Hopefully, the totality of all of this would lead to the accumulation of clusters of knowledge along all four dimensions of focus within the faculty, i.e. true organizational learning!

### **Information requirements for the business school as a cutting-edge learning organization**

The *aggregation* of all this creates focuses on clusters of faculty learning/discovery clusters based on research and development interests, and similarly also competence clusters based on faculty teaching activities. An important

implication of this strategy, particularly in order to ensure effective organizational learning, is that information should be managed differently. In practice, in most business schools, most information flows are based on the administrative or the cost side, often broken down according to such criteria as yield per programme, cost of research, extensive expense-based budgetary control, etc. However, information should now also have to be structured around the customer side! This type of customer-based information insight should help to shape the activity mix for academic value-creation *vis-à-vis* each customer-cum-learning partner. Traditionally, as already noted, the activity mix tends to be shaped by contribution per programme, cost allocations, etc. Needless to say, this ducks the question of having information available to answer what types of activity pattern would make sense for the key customers. This environmental focus should probably drive the information-handling process – the financial consequences should come as a secondary concern.

This would provide a better basis for using information as a learning tool. It is interesting to note that many of the leading scholars who deal with learning organizations do not refer to information at all as a basic element of organizational learning[4]. Why is this so? We tend to take information for granted. We assume that we understand what the customers want. We assume that we have enough knowledge to deduce from available information what to offer to a customer, and how to modify these offerings based on subsequent learning. The problem with this, however, is that the ability to understand the customer, if approached the traditional way, will be weakened or lost. Activities will then tend to be determined by historical patterns, rather than by an accumulation of the organizational learning that comes about from good interaction with each customer. One will tend to focus on teaching programmes, research activities, etc., out of context, and not seen as a part of an integrated value-creating service to a learning customer as called for from a learning partnership perspective, such as the one given in Figure 1. The business school’s own organizational learning will also be weakened!

## Conclusions

In this article, we have pointed out that organizational learning, in fact, can be expected to be a key driver for any leading business school which wants to advance and to respond to the challenges of its customers. The changes are great for any leading business school and they become particularly significant when the change agenda is reconciled with the change agendas of the leading client companies with whom the school is working; hence, the need for the business school to see itself as a learning organization!

We have pointed out that, traditionally, the organizational change agendas based on a discipline-based focus might lead to "skewed" organizational learning and lack of sufficiently effective organizational learning to support properly a realistic partner-based evolution of the business school's strategy. We have further seen that this partiality in organizational learning can, in part, be ameliorated by involving clusters of faculty members in meaningful, practitioner-oriented, real-life-driven teaching programmes, thus exposing the faculty as teams or clusters more directly to the learning requirements of living organizations. This argument can be taken a final significant step further, we have argued, by developing a closer, holistic link between learning client organizations and the business school, encompassing joint work on research, on research-based workshops, on benchmarking, on in-company focused learning activities, as well as on involvement in open programme activities. In our opinion, the change agenda, and thus the learning agenda of the business school, can benefit greatly from this learning partnership focus. The key is to pick a set of leading multinational corporate clients as learning partners to enable the business school to be the best learning organization!

Thus, this strategy requires a keen sense of choice; probably a faculty group can work

effectively only with a relatively small number of leading client companies. The effect might thus be "working more with fewer clients". Needless to say, this agenda calls for an organizational culture in the business school which allows this type of organizational learning to occur, without being unduly "derailed" by pressures from more traditional discipline-based and/or more traditional course-based organizational learning. For many business schools, this will perhaps be a potentially tight bottleneck. They may not realistically be able to learn organizationally through a partnership mode with leading global corporations because of inability to develop an internal focus on this – and only this! We feel that to develop a faculty culture to achieve this is particularly stimulating, since a faculty that largely adopts this approach can expect to see the benefits of organizational learning in a truly new and interesting way. However, more experience must be gained with this learning partnership-based organizational learning concept. We can expect to see many business schools working hard on this over the years to come and, also, as a result, expect much innovation when it comes to our understanding of the business school as an organizational learning entity.

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