
A learning organization's syllabus

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Abstract

Aims to address the question "What does a learning organization learn about?" Proposes a syllabus approach which covers six key areas; learning about one's job in the organization; learning about alignment of culture, values and strategy; learning about the likely future; learning about the organization's supply chains; learning how to challenge existing norms and ways of thinking; and developing an organizational memory. Discusses action learning as a developmental methodology which can address most of these syllabus areas. Concludes each section with prescriptive recommendations for practitioners.

What does a learning organization learn about?

Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to confront this question in a number of guises. As Editor of this journal, I have been privy to some of the brightest and best thinkers in the field. As a sometime consultant, I have been able to work with a number of organizations which aspire to the principles of the learning organization. Furthermore, as a researcher and teacher with an independent, action learning-based business school, International Management Centres, I have been able to explore principles, concepts and practices with an increasing number of my practitioner-students.

As such I have taken this opportunity to draw some of those thoughts and experiences together into an editorial statement and discussion paper.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a syllabus-driven approach to a learning organization. It identifies six important learning syllabuses for the organization, and seeks to address them by suggesting interventions for individuals, groups and organizational systems. It concludes by suggesting action learning as a development methodology of value to those interested in the learning organization. My aim is to be simple and prescriptive. All the interventions described have been tested in organizations. Some of them are named, some not. Some suggested further reading is listed at the end of the article, much of which can be found in back issues of *The Learning Organization*.

The six syllabus areas

Details of the six learning syllabuses are as follows:

- (1) Learning about your job in the organization, and how to do it better. To borrow from Senge, "personal mastery" [1].
- (2) Learning how to create alignment in the organization – what Collins and Porras [2] call "ideological indoctrination"; to create shared "mental models" (Senge [1] again), which creates an alignment of culture and strategy in your organization. That means, when people do their own thing, they do the right thing, and you do not have to stand over them and watch them all the time.

- (3) Learning about the future – using scenario planning, and anticipatory competence development.
- (4) Learning about the operating environment – understanding supply chains – which near-enough corresponds to the good old “fifth discipline” [1] of systems thinking.
- (5) Learning how to challenge the existing paradigms – avoiding myopia, considering present and future possibilities, not getting locked into paradigm protection and groupthink.
- (6) Developing an organizational memory – the ability to capture, store and retrieve knowledge and expertise.

I would not expect everyone in an organization to do all those things. Well, put it this way – if they did, I certainly would not buy any shares in it, because they would all be so busy learning that they would not be doing any work; their customers would be off to a less introspective supplier, and their staff would all be looking for new jobs.

Learning about your job in the organization

My publishers at MCB University Press publish a journal called the *International Journal of Clothing Science and Technology*. I love it, because it is so tangible compared with some of the esoteric stuff of management and social science. It publishes vastly learned articles on how not to get your seams puckered when they get sewn, what the tearing strain is in nylon as opposed to cotton, and so on.

Furthermore, it is a great reminder about relativities. If you are a machinist, quality is about sewing a straight seam. Does it help to understand the great universality of how your firm fits into the chain from cotton growers to shippers to manufacturers to retailers to customers, and all the pressures and variables around them? Should you be aware of the changing dynamics in the industry and its customer base? Well, no, actually. It helps if you can sew a straight, unpuckered seam.

What about if you are the CEO of an international textile manufacturer and trader? Well, you definitely need to know all that stuff, and it really does not help much if you can sew a straight seam.

For most people, in most organizations, learning how to do your job better is the heart

of the matter. Learning in an organization is about learning, deeply and profoundly, how to do a great job within that organization. Something like this used to be called “training” before it went out of fashion.

You cannot miss this one. Learning about the organization in a meaningful way is the bedrock on which all else rests. You have to be able to do the business – otherwise you are out of business. This area is addressed in some more detail in the section on “action learning”, below. Learning how to do your job better within the organization means two things:

- (1) an understanding of the *technical* aspects of your job;
- (2) an understanding of the *dynamic* interplays of people around you.

The first does not work without the second, which is why many brilliant technicians make lousy managers, and why many successful managers spend more time networking and playing politics than they do managing *per se*.

Here is a way of addressing both. Pretend everyone in your organization is a doctor or a lawyer, and obliged by dint of his or her profession to demonstrate professional updating. How would that apply for each individual? What is, or should be, each person's demonstrated continuing professional development? People can create CPU/CPD plans themselves, with a little encouragement; their presentation can be rolled into the annual appraisal process.

At the same time, ask everyone to think of their job as being at the centre of a spider's web of people within and outside the organization. What are their most important and regular interfaces? What is good and bad about each of those? How could they be improved? Spontaneous self-help groups will start to appear as people put together their analyses and try to address problems.

If you do nothing more than ask for regular analyses of interface relationships, and demonstrated continuing professional updating/development – you will be ahead of most of your competitors in creating a professionalized organization seeking to improve its technical competence and improve the dynamics of their interplays.

Learning about alignment

The most sensible thing I ever read about organizational strategy was coined by Henry

Minzberg of McGill University in Canada. He called it emergent strategy.

The concept was this. We put a plan together, but over time it does not quite work out the way we intended it to. In fact, it is quite often way off. That is because the interpretations of our intended strategy change it. People charged with implementation say, helpfully, "I'm not sure what this means, but I think it means this" or "Well, we tried that a couple of years back, and it didn't work, but this might" or "Well I know that won't work, so I'll try this instead". They might also say, unhelpfully, "That would be bad for me, so I'm not going to do it" or "That's all very well, but I'm too busy, so I'll ignore it and they'll forget about it" or "They don't know what our problems are serving real customers – there's no way I'm doing this".

Intended strategy falls away, and what takes place to create the realized or delivered strategy is emergent strategy. Emergent strategy is a function of two horrible intangibles – organizational culture and personal or group interpretation.

In the seminal *Fifth Discipline*, Senge[1] points to "shared values" as being crucial to the effective organization, and follows in the footsteps of many profound thinkers on management such as Peters[3] and Collins and Porras[2]. Why? Because of emergent strategy.

You cannot make emergent strategy go away. You can try incentives, tricks, motivational seminars, videos, posters, memos – but it still emerges. It is just one of those things.

So roll with it. If it emerges in a beneficial way, as a dynamic response to the changing dynamics of deliverers, customers and environments, then that is good news. Because if we stick to a plan and disregard the dynamics of the marketplace, then we are likely to be in real trouble. If everyone understands what we are about – what our business is, what we think is really important, what we think is less important, what you get fired for doing – you have more chance of the emergent strategy being of immense benefit.

Syllabus area two is learning about alignment in an organization. That requires determination and effort. The values have to be articulated and believed, then inculcated by whatever means possible. In an organization serious about its values, those who do not buy them should be rehabilitated, and if that will not work, asked to leave.

One of the best CEOs I ever worked with was Brian Wilson of Allied Irish (now AIB) Bank Britain in the mid 1980s. Brian has engineered the bank in the UK through a great change to be one of the first banks to embrace customer service. A little while later we were talking about what went well, and what did not. "The real mistake I made was being too patient with those who would not come on board. They were senior, they had been around a long time, but trying to accommodate them took up too much time and energy, and held us up. I should have given them one more chance, then removed them". Do not like it? Then do and get a job with a bank that does not say that the customer is the be-all and end-all.

In *Build to Last*[2], successful companies are compared to cults. They indoctrinate their staff. They brainwash them. "McDonald's make hamburgers. What does Disney make?" they ask at the Disney University. (Answer: we make people happy[2]). Learning about and then reinforcing the values is a long process, and not for the faint-hearted. But unless you want to have a managerial secret police force constantly checking that behaviours and actions are aligned to culture and values, you will be at the mercy of your emergent strategy.

What you could do is this. Get all your power holders together, and all your brightest and best next in line. Take them away for a couple of days. Their agenda is to put their beliefs and motivations on the table about the organization and construct, if at all possible, the shared bits. That is – why are we in business? What will the organization still believe in 20 years? Disney say, "We use our imagination to bring happiness to millions". Boeing say, "We live at the leading edge of avionics". Note that they do not say, "We make cartoons" or "We build theme parks" or "We make jumbo jets". Those are just how the values are made manifest.

Then, if you can get a coherent and believed coda together, try doing what AT&T did. Write down one of the values ("Respect for individuals"). Next to it, write down what it means. ("We treat each other with respect and dignity... we communicate frequently and with candour... we give individuals the authority to use their capabilities... our environment supports personal growth"... and so on). Next to that, write down what that means for individuals ("We expect you to recognize and respect the value of differences between

individuals, participate actively in the performance and review process”, and so on). Then, next to that, write down what that means in a managerial role (“We expect you to create and sustain an environment that recognizes and values differences between individuals”, and so on).

Then put that all on to a single sheet of paper, and deliver it to everyone. Finally, incorporate all the articulated behaviours into your performance review system. That is to say, give people rewards such as pay rises and promotions for conforming to the values, and discourage people from not conforming to them by not giving them rises, not promoting them, or getting rid of them.

This learning organization business is not easy. However, much of it is quite simple. Furthermore, being a learning organization certainly is not about being nice to all your staff. It is about treasuring the ones who are on side and doing their best, but about weeding out and showing the door to those who are, deliberately or otherwise, sabotaging the effort. If you want to be nice to everyone, however they behave, go and get a job in a church or something.

If alignment cannot be delivered, because there are no shared beliefs, then I am afraid that either you are going to cross your fingers about emergent strategy, or you are going to search out some other ways of aiming for organizational alignment.

Learning about the future

On the side of Mount Etna in Sicily are a number of small towns, plus innumerable hotels, gift shops, restaurants, and even a small ski area complete with chair lifts for the winter. They gather there because the soil is good, the tourist trade is good, and maybe because there is great air and a great view. Every time Etna erupts they do not run around in amazement wondering what is happening. The local economy does not get ruined. They just incorporate the possibility into their lives and carry on, planting vines, building garages, serving tourists. It is a great place to visit for any existential *Angst*-ridden executives unsure of what the future in their industry might hold.

Learning about the future would be on my syllabus for an *organization*, but not for all the individuals in it. Everyone in an organization plays a role, but not everyone is the same, or needs to be good at the same things. I am

fooling myself if I ask my cleaning staff to contribute meaningfully to debates about future strategy. I would like them to be really great at cleaning my office, and maybe present really smart improvement ideas about how they can do it better, and be really nice to people if ever they have to answer the phone. That is what I pay them to learn about.

I met once with the training and development people at NEC in Telford who told me how NEC approach learning about the future at the operational level. NEC Telford assemble a few NEC products – telephones, video monitors and so on. As a small part of a global organization, it may be called on at short notice to assemble other products, such as printers. There are a fairly limited range of possible products, but there is no local production plan beyond the short term. That is because, as a global player, NEC choose to alter their production capability and redeploy activities as they see best, and want to do so at short notice.

The training challenge is then, as they used to tell me in the Boy Scouts, to “be prepared”. We will give you a couple of weeks’ notice about changes in assembly, and we will ask for something from the menu of possibilities (monitors, phones, printers and so on), but we expect you to do it seamlessly. To “be prepared” at NEC Telford meant multi-skilling all the operational people to be able to work on any of the possible products. This meant familiarity with and practice on all the possible products, plus job definitions which embraced flexibility within the bounds of the product and process menus. Also it meant designing and installing movable and reconfigurable assembly lines. In addition to this, it means working on a zero defects programme at every workstation where the assembly process is constantly re-examined by the workers on the line, and improvements made when they are found.

Learning about the future is not the same as trying to predict the future. Unless you are Merlin the Magician, you cannot do it. Forecasts about the world, or your industry, or your sales figures, in five years’ time, or a year, or three months, are just guesses. The future is dynamic – it unrolls with too much complexity for us to understand beyond informed guesses about ranges of possibilities. Unless something really bizarre happens, we can forecast a range for bank interest rates in a year’s time with reasonable confidence.

However, tell me what the actual percentage point interest rate actually will be in one year, and you are just guessing.

Learning about the future involves two important steps. One is understanding the range of likely possibilities, and the other is getting ready to operate effectively within that range. To use some jargon, we are talking about scenario planning and anticipatory competence development.

The Internet is something which will impact heavily on many organizations, although most are not sure how. Here is how you can have a shot at learning about the future fairly painlessly. Get a mixed group of staff together, including some of your high-potentials. Think of as many ways as you can as to how the Internet might affect your business over the next ten years, both opportunities and adverse consequences. Having done so, prepare two or three likely-looking scenarios. Now think of some ways in which some key people within the organization can start to gain experience and knowledge now, to allow them to deal with the scenarios if and when they arrive, and put them to work on it. Repeat frequently, with other scenarios.

Learning about the operating environment

One of the greatest follies we have is that what we produce, whether product or service, has some intrinsic value just because we have made it and put a price on it, or spent money on producing it. It does not. It only has value when it is valued, i.e. when someone wants it. And someone only wants it when they see some benefit from it.

It was Sam Walton of Wal-Mart who said "If you're not serving a customer, you should be serving someone who is serving a customer. Any further away and you aren't any use". Most of us would not be quite that bold about our organizational configurations, but Walton had a point. It you are not serving a customer, or serving a server, just who are you serving? What value are you adding?

To help people address this kind of question, take a randomly selected bunch and put them on an "on-the-road" project for the next three months to suppliers and customers, and suppliers' suppliers, and customers' customers. Have each one hold an hour's workshop back in the organization on what he or she has learned. Then take a look at how you are organized, how people spend their time,

how you communicate with customers and how you reward people's efforts – and involve your on-the-road team in your thoughts.

If you can understand big pictures, you have much more chance of getting decisions right.

Learning to challenge existing paradigms

Jurassic Park[4] is an interesting story. Briefly, for those of you who have been on the Moon for the past few years, it concerns a billionaire entrepreneur who manages to clone dinosaurs and builds a theme park around them. The fences of course are failure-proof and and fail-safe. And, of course, *Tyrannosaurus rex* manages to escape.

But the billionaire (Richard Attenborough in the movie) cannot accept that his systems have crashed. With rampaging dinosaurs all over the place, he is insisting that everything is okay. It has to be okay. The systems were designed to be perfect. And he simply will not accept it until *T. rex* sticks his head through the window and tries to eat him.

It is a marvellous paradigm protection illustration. We can get very sure about ourselves, and choose to ignore evidence which does not fit that world view. It is something which is particularly manifest in a strong culture, which given the notion of shared vision and indoctrination into the chosen ideology (see syllabus two) is a worry.

That means we have to engineer paradigm challenge. This should not be for everyone – in fact, it should be for a few selected people only. However, here is how you can do it. Take a small, mixed group away for a day or two, and get them to pull apart some sacred cows. What is our business? Why do we set prices the way we do? Why do we have a separate head office building? For each challenge, the group should come up with a well-argued alternative and present it on paper or in person (depending on how brave they feel) to the board. See what happens. Repeat every six months with a new group.

Develop an organizational memory

Individuals can learn. At a simple level I can put my finger in a fire, note the pain, generalize the experience to include every fire and all of my fingers, and try not to do it in the future. That is an ability made possible by my memory. If I could not remember, I might keep repeating the experience. I would not learn.

Organizationally, if we do not have a memory, a means of storing and recovering information and experience, we will not be able to learn. Memory development is something for everyone in the organization to address.

In an organization I worked for several years ago we used to debrief projects by preparing a "Lessons wot we learned" report. As a young smug MBA graduate I was dismayed by having to sit in the boardroom for half a day and read these rather folksy reminiscences before I was let loose on my first project – but 20 years of snapshot wisdom resided there, and in due course I too produced my "Lessons wot we learned" summary and added it to the archive for some other trainee. I wonder if they are still there.

Here is how you can develop a corporate memory. First, map all your processes. Every individual, alone and in teams, is engaged in processes and procedures. Everyone can note down what the steps are and what the interactions and flows are. Some interesting suggestions might emerge. Furthermore, if you are not already registered to ISO 9000, mapping your processes is a useful step towards so doing.

Second, introduce the "Lessons..." project debriefing system. Keep them in binders in the boardroom. Make new recruits read them.

Action learning: a methodology for organizational learning

Action learning can be used to address any or all of these issues. For those unfamiliar with action learning (why are you unfamiliar? Get with it!) here is a brief summary of what it is and does.

Action learning puts forward a simple proposition – that we learn best about work, at work and through work, within a structure which encourages learning. So if we want really to learn how to improve the assembly of a monitor, we really have to get the soldering iron out, on a real line. If we want to learn how to create and implement a marketing plan, we have really to create one. In so doing, our knowledge gaps become apparent, so we learn how to access and draw from the body of knowledge on a particular subject (whatever it is).

The reason we really have to do it is that theory alone will not tell us the real difficulties – that the person three places before us on the

line is setting a component in such a way that the solder will not go in properly, or that the finance director resists the idea of marketing planning, and blocks initiatives at the board. Improvement of the line therefore becomes the *technical* knowledge of soldering in the right place, plus the *dynamic* skill of helping the person three steps up to do it differently. Marketing planning becomes the *technical* knowledge of information assimilation, portfolio analysis and industry demographics plus the *dynamic* skills of convincing the finance director.

This is done in a framework of action (try it and feel how it feels) plus reflection (why is it working? why is it not? who can help? who can hinder?), plus concept construction (if these variables are in place in this way we can reasonably assume it will work the same way next time; if one of them changes, how will it affect the whole?), plus planning for the future (next time we should make sure we do this, this and this). Normally action learning groups are helped or facilitated by someone who is guiding the process, and aiming to make the participants themselves able to identify issues and search, find and use information to bring to bear on the issues.

Because it works within the constraints and realities of organizations which cannot be captured in textbooks (political games, stupidities, private agendas, differing world views and so on) and assimilates them cheerfully and necessarily into the learning process. It is the best methodology we have for learning for real about organizations.

To organize an action learning intervention, take a problem which is annoying you, take a cross-functional group of people who can touch the problem in some way, and charge them to deliver a solution in three months' time. Put them together for a half-day every two weeks, and work with them by guiding the process only. Stay out of the content. Keep asking questions like "Why?" "So what?" "Who can help?" "Who can block?" "How can we do it better next time?" Arm them with some research design skills; ask for a written report and a presentation to the board at the end of the project, and see what happens. Keep notes – you will be learning about how to do it too.

Such an approach directly impacts on four of the six syllabus areas. It directly addresses "learning about your job/the organization". It should, properly facilitated, address "learning

about the future” and “learning about the environment”. In addressing and tackling real problems for real, learners can and should be encouraged to think about future scenarios, and about impacts on the supply chain.

A key part of properly executed action learning programmes is the maintenance of a learning log, and an intellectual project write-up at termination, as a reinforcement of the learning. This serves to add to the organization's memory banks.

An action learning initiative can address paradigm challenge, with appropriate facilitation and encouragement, although normally it is rooted in a more concrete project. It could, also, as an investigative area, be a methodology by which alignment, shared values and emergent strategy were addressed, although the process of action learning *per se* does not specifically address this.

Summary

This paper has set out to provide, in a simple and prescriptive format, a syllabus approach to learning organization development. It has done so by suggesting six areas which an organization and its people should learn about, and simple steps to starting work in all of the areas. It has also recommended action learning as an effective methodology for organizational learning.

Implications for those charged with learning organization development are:

- Address first and foremost the area of learning about jobs in the organization. This is a bedrock on which organizational success rests.
- Ensure that a level of debate is taking place in the organization which addresses future scenarios and challenges existing paradigms, and that such debate is institutionalized as part of the organization's development and policy-making activities, rather than left to fester as rumour and discontent.
- Ensure that future competences are being anticipated and developed.
- Prevent organizational learning from being overly introspective by bringing organizational learning out into the supply chains, both backwards and forwards.

- Tackle the dangers of emergent strategy in a non-aligned organization by learning about and aiming for organizational alignment.
- Oversee the creation of organizational memory banks.

The path towards a learning organization would appear to be long and arduous, requiring discipline and persistence. The effectiveness of the learning organization concept will be properly tested when all the steps have been put in place by a number of firms – then we can see if the reality truly matches the expectations.

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