

---

# Leadership and learning organisations

---

*Ray Mahoney*

---

## The author

**Ray Mahoney** has just left the Corporation of London to work as an independent learning and development consultant to organisations and individuals.

---

## Keywords

Leadership, Responsibility, Corporate culture, Corporate communication, Values, Organizational development

---

## Abstract

Considers the concept of the learning organisation and the role of leadership in creating an environment for such a thing to exist. It introduces the recipe used by the author for 20 years, to assist groups and individuals involved in "action learning". It does not offer any magical solutions to creating the perfect organisation, or for solving people problems, because the author believes we are dealing with the human condition which in his view is not perfect. He argues that leadership should exist at all levels in the organisation and that directors and senior managers have a major responsibility in encouraging this to happen. Finally, it offers some questions you may ask of yourself and colleagues when deciding if your organisation is a learning one with good leadership.

---

## Electronic access

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at  
<http://www.emerald-library.com>

During the 1990s the concept of the learning organisation was much discussed and written about. Therefore in this article I am not going to redefine what I believe to be a learning organisation. I am trusting you, the reader, to have struggled with the concept – ten years in my case – and ideas about learning organisations, as I have. During my MBA studies, in the late 1990s, I began to think there is no such thing as a learning organisation, but lately I have gained renewed hope.

It is also not my intention to regurgitate all the leadership theories that have been so eloquently written about by such giants of the management world as Reg Revans, Warren Bennis, Mary Parker Follett, Peter Senge, Lennart Rohlin, Ronnie Lessom, Kenneth Blanchard, Nancy Foy, Sally Garrett, Roger Gaunt and many others. I believe theories have a place and describe what has happened or could happen in a given situation, but more important for me are the actions people take in their organisations and the consequences these have for those working there.

What I intend to do is stimulate your interest and perhaps stir your thoughts, so that you may take a fresh look at your own organisation, or the one for which you are consulting. Will you challenge what you are doing, perhaps ask some searching questions of yourself and colleagues about how the organisation is working?

Let me say from the start that in my view leadership must exist at all levels in an organisation, regardless of size, for it to consider itself a learning organisation. I also believe that in today's society there is no excuse for directors or senior managers not to encourage leadership at all levels. There is no excuse for them not creating an environment where everyone can participate in this process to the appropriate degree required of them. Directors and senior managers who find reasons for not valuing their staff and colleagues and not creating a learning environment are in my view going the way of the dinosaur, to extinction. The director who is afraid of being questioned and cannot abide diversity in the organisation is missing the great riches that can abound and if unleashed will be of immense value to all in the organisation.

The belief that people are the most valuable asset of an organisation has also been widely accepted. However, not so valuable that they are sometimes released to make a higher

---

The views in this article are personal and based on a lifetime in various organisations, with no time off for good behaviour.

short-term profit margin or savings for the public purse.

So how is it that some organisations have discovered and embraced progressive ideas and found new ways to operate while others are stuck in their old command and control systems? Well, in my experience of large, medium and small organisations, in both the public and private sector that I have worked in, the successful ones are using the advances in technology and communications systems and actively encouraging healthy exchanges of views and ideas at and between all levels.

## Leadership

It seems to me that over the last decade or so directors and training managers have been constantly searching for the Holy Grail of organisation redevelopment. They have done this by the systems approach, introducing competencies, quality methods, management training, better bonuses or some other method. They do not seem to stop and evaluate the leadership of the organisation.

I believe we know when we are doing a good job of leading people. Colleagues also know when they are being properly led. So why is it that we still think there is a perfect answer to all this leadership business? That somewhere out there is a tablet to make us all perfect leaders? We are dealing with the human condition and that is not perfect and in my view never will be.

Leadership is like playing a round of golf; it has to be worked at. You have to take into account the prevailing conditions, your own style of play, and the clubs at your disposal. Also, most important of all, you have to take into account your enthusiasm for wanting to improve your standard. Just as in golf, I believe directors and managers should be always looking to improve their leadership qualities.

However, I wonder if it is true that organisations in different sectors, industries or different parts of the world need the same style of leadership? I don't believe they do. I think what we need to consider is the prevailing national/regional culture, the religious beliefs and life experiences of the people involved, before we start to come up with the magical, all-encompassing solution. As I have said previously, I don't think such a solution exists:

One person, showing good leadership, is worth 50 gurus teaching it (Ray Mahoney).

## People

Getting back to the people bit, a tool I have found useful for work with groups and individuals is the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, developed by Elizabeth Myers-Briggs. It builds on the pioneering work of Carl Jung and it identifies 16 personality types. The use of such instruments can be the key to success in organisations in solving people problems, rather than searching for a magical solution. Anyone who has lived in a family group could testify to the times when personality differences lead to a conflict of interest. These conflicts can sometimes lead to problems being avoided and unresolved for years – sometimes even lifetimes. This has been true in some organisations I have worked and lived in. It is how the personality differences are handled, I believe, that helps create a learning organisation.

In the action learning work I have been involved in for 20 years, I have used along with tools such as Myers-Briggs a simple “recipe” that has helped me to understand and value personality differences. Listening and trying to understand someone else's contrary view on life can be very rewarding. It can of course also be frustrating if they are not prepared to listen to my view.

This recipe has aided me, as it has the groups and individuals I have had the privilege to work with on organisational and personal development over 20 years. Here are the six elements of the recipe:

- (1) *R = responsibility*. The responsibility to accept that there may be other ways to think about and do things in this world. To take responsibility for my own actions and how they may affect others.
- (2) *E = experience*. It is the real here and now leadership experiences that we need to take responsibility for. Not the case studies of management programmes that require detached analytical solutions.
- (3) *C = confidence*. Having the courage and confidence to lead with integrity. Have the confidence to ask questions of the organisation.
- (4) *I = “I” language*. Having the courage and confidence to use “I” language”, when it is appropriate. To own what I am saying and encourage that in others.
- (5) *P = process review*. To conduct process reviews at the end of team meetings, encouraging myself and colleagues to confront and deal with interpersonal problems at the appropriate moment.

- (6) *E = equality of opportunity*. To encourage everyone to contribute to their own level of competence. To create an environment where everyone feels they can contribute, when they wish to.

I have also found it useful to ask myself these questions at different times:

- (1) Do I enjoy my job?
- (2) Do I enjoy my job in this organisation?

If the answer is yes to both questions, you may well be in a learning organisation.

If the answer is no to either or both the questions, what does that say to you about the leadership at the top of the organisation? The next questions may help with further understanding about leadership:

- (3) What is the prevailing culture or cultures in the organisation?
- (4) Is there a carrot or stick approach to motivation?
- (5) How many colleagues are in disciplinary situations?
- (6) How high is the absentee rate?
- (7) Do my directors and managers understand themselves?

Finding and analysing answers to these questions are in my view fundamental to the good health of organisations, particularly question seven. As Gaunt states:

Before I can lead others I must first understand my own motivations and myself (Roger Gaunt).

With the advance of technology the ease with which we can now communicate both within and without our organisation is becoming quicker all the time. This brings a whole new challenge or opportunity for leaders. What information should be made available and to whom in the organisation, seems a crucial point for healthy organisational life. How can access be provided for as many staff as possible, or do we preserve it for the few? I have often heard it said and experienced it myself: “Computers will be installed in your section, but you’re not a priority as identified by the IT group”. This can undermine all the good work done by staff development, team leaders and others.

### Personal and organisation values

This is my final section and I believe the most fundamental of all in the learning organisation. As in families or social groups, not everyone adheres to the stated or unstated values all of the time. However, I believe not only that the organisation values should be

stated, but also that all parties should have a part in moulding and developing them. I was present at a staff conference recently where the chief executive of the company said in his presentation, “Staff are the most valuable asset of this organisation”. It was, however, stated through gritted teeth, and as if he believed that his staff did not detect that he was deluding himself. It is in my view foolish still to treat staff as a master-serf relationship; it is also plain lousy business sense as well. Unfortunately it is still happening. I hope not in your organisation, though.

### Creating change

I thought this may grab your attention and some of you may have jumped here first before reading the article. Well, I believe we all have to take responsibility for creating the learning organisation, as in the first part of the recipe. Try this exercise. Hold your arm straight out in front of you. Point your thumb to the ceiling, your index finger at the chief executive or your boss and then look at where the other three fingers are pointing. They should be pointing at you, demonstrating that you have three times as much responsibility for change as anyone else. I am not saying it is easy. I offer no magical solutions, but I do wish you well and hope you have success creating learning organisations of the present and the future.

Some thoughts for company people looking for outside help in creating the learning organisation:

- (1) Get as many people inside who are as enthusiastic about the idea as you are.
- (2) Check how your director of HR feels about it.
- (3) Check out where your chief executive thinks it will fit with the business plan.
- (4) Check out if your director of finance sees it as a cost or an investment.
- (5) Don’t put off getting started till next year – start yesterday.

When appointing consultants from the outside to work with your organisation, don’t trust the ones with an answer to all your ills. They may just be peddling snake oil.

### References

- Gaunt, R. (1991), *Personal and Group Development for Managers*, Longman Group, UK.  
 Mahoney, R. (1997), *The Learning Organization in the Public Sector*, Gower Publishing.