



VIEWPOINT

Organizational learning vs the learning organization: a conversation with a practitioner

Conversation
with a
practitioner

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Abstract

Purpose – Through a conversation with a practitioner, aims to understand the definitions given to the learning organization and how they relate to a model of organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Provides a brief overview of a conversation concerning organizational learning vs the learning organization.

Findings – Organizational learning and the learning organization can and should co-exist. To be effective as a learning organization there is a need for a deep learning cycle and recognition that it will take time.

Originality/value – Offers advice on how to be an effective learning organization.

Keywords Learning organizations, Learning

Paper type Viewpoint

Recently, I was at a meeting with a group of experienced and skilled organizational development practitioners and was intrigued when a manager of learning and organizational development at a large prestigious hospital introduced herself to me by saying:

I am working on a major organization wide initiative and recently had a huge “aha” moment. We have been exploring organizational learning but what we really need to focus on is the learning organization.

Interesting. I wanted to understand her definitions of organization learning and the learning organization and how they related to my model of organizational learning.

She explained that the starting point for the hospital initiative was to explore organizational learning programmatically. Their focus was on looking at existing internal programs, e.g. The Center for Career Development, Continuing Medical Education, Compliance Training. As the project progressed, the Manager revisited *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990). She saw that the team was only looking at training and formal learning programs. She realized that the project should expand to include informal learning as well as the formal programs. Further, she recognized the need to understand the role that inquiry plays in the organization. She began to ask questions: What is the organization’s approach to problem solving? How are meetings managed? Where are stories told? What are the laws, legends and oral history of the organization? Do managers only manage performance or are they coaches as well? Is dialogue and reflection encouraged? Are rewards based only on results or on relationships? How does the organization view mistakes and failure? These questions led to her



recommendation that the team expand the project to study the organization's philosophical underpinnings and values as they developed an integrated learning strategy. The work is still in process, but the initial response has been positive. The manager sees this sort of inquiry as reflecting a subtle shift from programmatic organizational learning to becoming a learning organization – which can have a significant impact within the hospital.

The learning organization vs organizational learning

This conversation quickly brought me back to discussions and debates I participated in during the 1990s. When I engaged in those discussions, it was with a few academics and practitioners who were studying companies, e.g. Ford, Shell, and Hanover Insurance, that were experimenting with the five disciplines described by Senge (1990). At that time some people advocated for Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization, as a goal, a state that could be achieved. Others advocated for organizational learning as a process supported by Argyris and Schön (1978), Huber (1991), Garvin (1993), and Glynn *et al.* (1994). Schwandt and Marquardt (1999) saw the organizational learning process as integrating performance and learning.

I argued then, and believe even more strongly now, that it is not either the learning organization or organizational learning. I believe that Senge's five disciplines are integral components in a learning organization, providing tools and methods that are applicable and useful in the process of organizational learning. If organizational learning is seen as a continuous learning cycle, then an organization can not arrive at a point in time when it declares itself "a learning organization", a noun or an end state. On the other hand, any organization can identify with being in a constant state of learning and declare itself to be practicing organizational learning.

In a follow-up conversation with the hospital manager, I used the opportunity to revisit my hypothesis that to sustain performance during times of constant change requires integrating performance and learning. I see the five disciplines as being relevant to integrating performance and learning, but they are not sufficient alone to ensure and sustain organizational learning. This position is supported by Senge *et al.* (1994) when he says:

While the disciplines are vital, they do not in themselves provide much guidance on how to begin the journey of building a learning organization . . . The real work of building learning organizations is the work of the deep learning cycle. [It] takes place within a shell and architecture of guiding ideas, innovations in infrastructure and theory, methods and tools (Senge *et al.*, 1994, pp. 21-22).

I offer a guide and framework to begin an organizational learning journey. It is based on Parsons (1968) general theory of social action that has performance and learning elements. The basic tenet of this theory is that social system changes occur through the learning process and are related to cultural patterns and basic assumptions. The framework uses Schwandt's definition of organizational learning and his dynamic organizational learning model.

Schwandt (1993) defined organizational learning as:

A system of actions, actors, symbols and processes that enables an organization to transform information into valued knowledge which in turn increases its long-run adaptive capacity (p. 8).

He views organizational behavior as more than performance and sees the creative capacity that influences an organization’s cultural values. This perspective describes how an organization learns as a system. Schwandt’s model emphasizes the relationships and integration of subsystems, which allows the organization to increase its learning capacity.

The four functions of Schwandt’s learning system (Figure 1) and the Parsons (1968) equivalents are as follows:

- (1) The environmental interface subsystem, Parsons adaptation, which is the locus of information intake and output and requires mechanisms to secure, filter, and expel information.
- (2) The action-reflection subsystem, Parsons goal attainment, which creates valued knowledge from new information, the goal of the learning system.
- (3) Dissemination/diffusion or structuration[1] subsystem, Parsons integration, which transfers information and knowledge within the organization, thus integrating the learning system. Dissemination techniques are formal procedures and policies that are purposefully directed. Diffusion techniques are informal communication, rumors, and formal communication. Electronic mechanisms are central to this subsystem for virtual teams.
- (4) The meaning and memory subsystem, Parsons culture or pattern maintenance, which maintains mechanisms that establish criteria for judgment, selection, focus, and control of the organizational learning system. Beliefs, values, assumptions, and artifacts – the cultural components of the organization – are included in this subsystem.

Schwandt’s four learning subsystems are interdependent. The arrows in Figure 2 show the relationship between the products of the subsystems. These interchange mechanisms are the elements of input and output that Parsons (1968) defined as a medium of interchange. Similar to Parsons, Schwandt defines these products of the subsystems as media of exchange or media of interchange. These are processes, procedures and roles manipulated by the organization and individuals who produce invisible networks. They are patterns of action that allow for mutual exchange among the subsystems. The media of exchange or interchange media are as follows:

- (1) *New information, output of the environmental interface subsystem*: the learning system accesses new information from the external environment and from

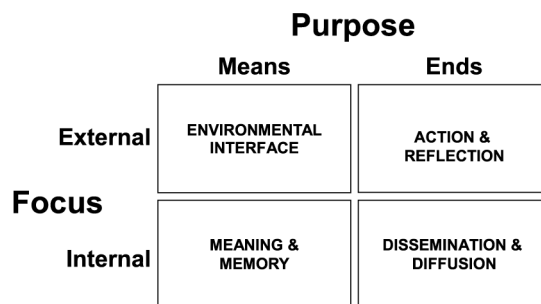


Figure 1.
Schwandt's learning
subsystems

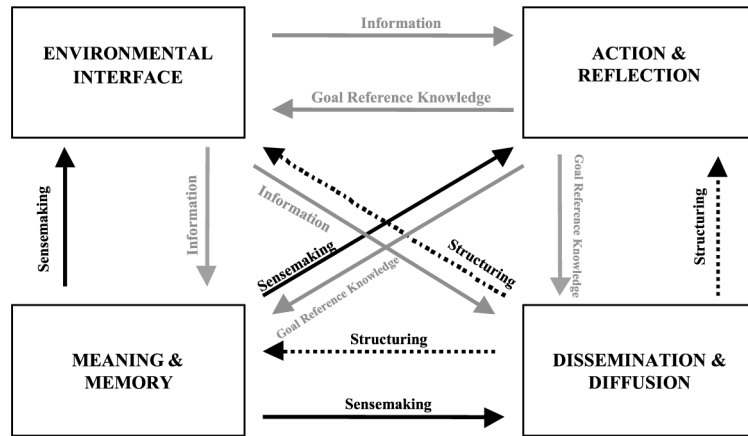


Figure 2.
Media of interchange in
Schwandt's learning
subsystems

within. The subsystem's function is adaptation. New information comes into the system from outside and leaves the organizational learning system through the adaptation function.

- (2) *Goal-referenced knowledge, output of the action-reflection subsystem*: the goals of the learning system are to adapt through learning. This is different from the goal of the performance system, which adapts through performance. Both contribute to the organization's ability to change for survival. For analysis purposes, the two subsystems are separated.
- (3) *Structuring, an output of the dissemination-diffusion subsystem*: the integration of organizational structures, information technology, roles, policies, procedures, and processes produces a dynamic result – structuration. The structuring media of exchange integrates the other three subsystems in the organizational learning system. Structuring variables or mechanisms allow for information and knowledge to move within the learning system and the organization.
- (4) *Sensemaking, an output of the meaning and memory subsystem*: sensemaking functions to accomplish pattern maintenance. The sensemaking produced and transferred from the meaning and memory subsystem is represented by language and symbols. This medium makes sense of actions through reflection; moves and classifies goal-referenced knowledge into stored memory; and is required by the dissemination-diffusion subsystem to generate appropriate structuring. Language and symbols – defined as words, signals, and knowledge structures (schema and scripts) – are the means that the meaning and memory subsystem uses to communicate with other subsystems. Language and symbols are required to produce useful explicit information, goal-referenced knowledge and the structure for organizational learning (Schwandt *et al.*, 1998).

These four interchange media can be measured via organizational variables such as industry conferences (new information), strategy formation processes (goal-referenced knowledge), roles and norms (structuring), and schema/scripts (sensemaking).

For learning and organizational development practitioners the focus should be on the internal interchange media: structuring and sensemaking. Structuring variables include use of information technology, roles, norms, leadership, rewards and recognition, and education and development. Sensemaking variables are related to collective cognitive schema and behavioral actions of the team that are essential for organizational learning. Sensemaking variables include, values, language, scripts, and schema. Values represent an understanding of the operative culture. Language is a symbolic representation of assumptions. Scripts and schema are two terms for knowledge structures, which are the framework within which meaning is created. Schema represent shared meanings, mental models or frames of reference defined by Senge (1990) as:

Deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action (p. 8).

Scripts are a special type of schema devoted specifically to the retention of context-specific knowledge about events and event sequences.

These variables can be seen as levers for a learning and organizational development practitioner to push to move her organization towards continuous learning. Structuring variables are easier to define than sensemaking variables because they are within the formal system. For example information technology, particularly collaborative technologies, can be implemented to encourage knowledge capture and sharing. Norms in the form of policies and procedures, e.g. the use of technology to capture lessons learned and for documenting meetings, are tools for learning. Team learning methods and tools from *The Fifth Discipline* can be implemented as an example of organizational norms. Creating specific roles with associated rewards and recognition, e.g. knowledge managers, coaches, mentors are often advantageous. Leaders that encourage and model learning behaviors, e.g. reflection, inquiry, integrate learning into their performance efforts. Training and education programs on the process of learning as well as content, e.g. technical skills and new knowledge, help create a on-going individual and collective learning.

On the other hand, sensemaking variables contribute to the culture of learning, are often informal and take time to implement. Individuals using personal mastery (one of the five disciplines) tools and techniques are involved in a learning process. Creating common vision (shared vision, another of the five disciplines), goals, language and values, e.g. learning versus knowing, collaborating versus competing are critical for organizational learning. Scripts and schema are important for transferring learnings and sustaining culture, often in the form of story telling and creating an organizational memory.

Organizational learning that integrates performance and learning results from the dynamic interaction between the sensemaking and structuring variables. Human values and emotions play a significant role in effective organizational learning. Strong sensemaking factors can overcome weak structuring factors. From *The Fifth Discipline* perspective understanding the dynamic interactions of the Schwandt organizational learning model within an organization is an example of systems thinking, the fifth discipline.

Organizational learning and the learning organization can and should co-exist. Fundamentally to be effective as a learning organization there is a need for a deep learning cycle and recognition that it will take time.

Skills involving fundamental new ways of thinking and interacting take years to master. New sensibilities and perceptions of our world are a by-product of long-term growth and change. Deep beliefs and assumptions are not like light switches that can be turned on and off (Senge *et al.*, 1994, p. 21).

This goes against the short-term orientation of most organizations today. Our hospital learning and organizational development manager recognizing the need to become a learning organization can begin by understanding the dynamic interchange of structuring and sensemaking factors within the organizational learning systems model. She is on the right path to have a significant impact within her hospital environment by understanding the organization's informal learning activities, while at the same time, addressing formal training and development programs.

Note

1. Early versions of the model identified the subsystem as dissemination/diffusion. Later versions label this subsystem Structuration. In the figure the earlier name is retained.

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