
Building and sustaining a learning organization

*Richard Teare and
Richard Dealtry*

The authors

Richard Teare is Forte Professor, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK.

Richard Dealtry is Professor, DSA Business Consultants, Harborne, UK.

Abstract

Considers how to create a learning environment and the implications for learning organizations. Draws on an Internet conference with managers from airport owner and operator BAA Plc to debate four themes: modelling the learning process in organizations; organizational readiness; teamworking and learning and networked learning. Relates these to an agenda for organizational learning and renewal.

Introduction

This article considers how to create a learning environment and the implications for learning organizations. The literature reveals that many organizations are experimenting with “new” approaches to learning, coupled with current and future business goals (see Table I). The chapter draws on the views and experiences of members of two organizations undertaking workplace learning programmes at postgraduate level. The debate about aspects of in-company learning took place at an Internet conference entitled “The Learning Organization – Concepts and Realities” and the observations of managers and other contributors are reported here. Key themes are summarized and related to an agenda for organizational learning and renewal.

Creating a learning environment

Mumford (1996) observes that the concept of a learning organization is the subject of wide-ranging debate. He detects great interest by human resource professionals who recognize the value of organizational learning and a tendency towards cynicism by line managers who need to be convinced that it offers a recipe for actioning desirable objectives. In response, Mumford examines the nature of a learning organization and suggests how to achieve it by “Creating an environment where the behaviours and practices involved in continuous development are actively encouraged” (p. 27). Mumford sees the main benefits of creating a learning environment as:

- ensuring the long-term success of the organization;
- making incremental improvements a reality;
- ensuring that successes and best practices are transferred and emulated;
- increasing creativity, innovation and adaptability;
- attracting people who want to succeed and learn and retaining them;
- ensuring that people are equipped to meet the current and future needs of the organization.

The first step in diagnosing the interactions that occur in the “learning environment” is to examine the active roles of managers and the related behaviours. Beyond this, Honey and Mumford define four roles that managers

Table I Creating a learning environment

Authors	Focus	Sub-theme
Mumford (1996)	Considers the concept of the learning organization and outlines an approach to creating a meaningful learning environment, beginning with a self-diagnosis of managerial behaviours and practices	Managerial roles in creating a learning environment
DeFilippo (1996)	Describes elements of the learning organization model developed by Pratt & Witney as the company embraced cellular manufacturing. Reveals how productive units have changed their culture from strict hierarchical control to higher employee involvement	Integrated support for cell-oriented business units
Harung (1996)	Examines evidence of relating to the link between mature corporate culture and high levels of collective performance. Observes that a key feature of advanced organizations is the ability to satisfy all stakeholders simultaneously. Uses a case example to explore this	Relating learning to stakeholder needs and expectations
Wright and Belcourt (1996)	Illustrates the role of on-the-job training (OJT) in operationalizing learning organization concepts. Argues that practical training provides a tangible sign of action that appeals to line managers and helps to put theory into practice	Relating training to broader-based organizational learning
Coulson-Thomas (1996)	Examines the impact of business performance re-engineering (BPR) in a sample of European-based firms. Findings suggest that BPR efforts yield short-term benefits but tend to neglect longer term learning and efforts to source and sustain competitive advantage	Balancing short- and long-term perspectives on organizational development
Heraty and Morley (1995)	Explores how to conduct research in organizations and emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the research design appropriately reflects the values and experiences of organizational members	Relating action research to the learning organization
Borzsony and Hunter (1996)	Outlines a five-year learning-through-partnership programme established in a university. Explains the background to partnership and learning organizations, the action research framework and the practical processes and techniques used to turn the idea into reality	Learning partnerships
White (1994)	Calls for a deeper exploration of the changes in thinking and behaviour necessary to create a learning organization. Explores the shift from information to knowledge and the potential this affords for creative learning development in organizations	Creativity and the learning culture

should adopt so that opportunities for learning can be prioritized:

- (1) *Role model* – demonstrate (behaviour and actions) personal enthusiasm for learning and development.
- (2) *Provider* – be a conscious and generous provider of learning and development opportunities for others and an active supporter and encourager whenever opportunities are taken up.

- (3) *System builder* – build learning into the system so that it is integrated with normal work processes and embedded in the conscious agenda.
- (4) *Champion* – the importance of learning for other parts and the organization as a whole.

DeFilippo (1996) traces the current interest in the learning organization to the work of

Senge and his widely read book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). Senge contends that the only long-term sustainable source of competitive advantage in an organization is for it to learn faster than its competitors and if it is to achieve this, it needs to be more effective than the sum of its parts. Senge offers a framework for learning founded on five key areas or disciplines:

- (1) *Systems thinking* – understanding the whole rather than just the fractional parts of organizational thinking and behaviour.
- (2) *Personal mastery* – a readiness to continually renew personal learning and to relate this to organizational work.
- (3) *Shared vision* – related to conviction, commitment and clarity of intent that generates a need for learning and the collective will to learn.
- (4) *Mental models* – that assist managers to challenge their own assumptions and views of the “current reality”.
- (5) *Team learning* – to encourage work groups to engage in dialogue.

Harung (1996) describes a series of steps that he portrays as a transition from task-based to value-based organizational development. Task-based organizations are characterized by command and control hierarchies where a comparatively small number of senior managers make decisions and develop policies. In these “power-driven” organizations he suggests that employees are most likely to be promoted if they perform in a prescribed way. Beyond this, process-based organizations require a more open, participative framework and as they mature, they may become more value-based as they strive to satisfy a wider group of stakeholders. Harung highlights the organizational changes that occur during the transition from task-based to value-based development (see Table II).

The learning organization – concepts and realities

The literature tells us that many organizations are experimenting with “new” approaches to learning and coupling these with process improvement among many other initiatives (see Table III). The challenge is often to “do more with less” and to “be smarter and act smarter” in responding to the complexities of change. Perhaps this is best summarized by

the statement attributed to Revans: “... an organization’s capacity to learn must exceed the rate of change imposed on it”. The Internet conference “The Learning Organization – Concepts and Realities” sought to explore aspects of organizational learning and to relate them to our understanding of the meaning and relevance of the “learning organization” as a corporate entity and its relationship to two organizations in particular, BAA plc and Fina plc. Participants were managers undertaking action learning programmes at postgraduate certificate, diploma and MBA levels respectively and four articles, together with a summary overview and discussion points for each, were used as a conference discussion resource (see Appendix).

What is a learning organization?

In broad terms, a learning organization can be viewed as a social system whose members have learned conscious, communal processes for continually:

- generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning to improve the performance of the organizational system in ways important to all stakeholders; and
- monitoring and improving performance (Drew and Smith, 1995).

In 1996, BAA’s management committee reviewed and endorsed a strategy for training and development which would help the company to address its key challenges. This was not intended to be a once only effort but the start of a continuous assessment process focusing on efficiency and effectiveness in learning. Tony Ryan, BAA’s director, Training and Management Development explains:

In BAA we have come to realize that every one of our business strategies will require continuous upgrading and this will impact on the competences and skills of our people. Investments in technology, capital equipment and process changes are substantial but these inputs cannot realize the goals of growing the business and staying ahead of the competition without a matching investment in people. The company’s mission statement aims to enable all our employees to develop their potential and to make a direct contribution to the company’s success. Our Chief Executive, Sir John Egan, has repeatedly stated that we will do everything possible to avoid job losses and protect continuity of employment. These goals can only be achieved if the company takes positive steps to encourage and support learning and this means that every employee should accept the need to

Table II Towards a learning organization: transitional steps and characteristics

Task-based organizational behaviour	Value-based organizational behaviour
Top-down initiative and command	Empowerment, dispersed initiative, self-management
Managers and employees	Self-sufficient knowledge workers and co-leaders
Few effective managers	Many effective members
Emphasis on hierarchy (vertical)	Emphasis on network (horizontal)
Rigid organizational structures	Self-organized, fluid and sometimes spontaneous groups
Many and elaborate rules	Shared vision, few and simple rules
Sharp division of labour	Overlapping and multidimensional work
Clear-cut organizational edges	Customer and supplier participation
Slow mass production	Rapid adaptation to customer needs
Managers control and solve problems	Leaders symbolize unity and exemplify maturity
Win-lose assumption and opposition	Win-win assumption and mutual support
Divergent individual and organizational needs	Meet individual and organizational needs concurrently
Range of anti-social even anti-organizational behaviour	Co-existence of freedom and ethical behaviour
Outer organizational promotion	Inner personal growth
Individuals and the organization compete against others	Individuals and the organization compete against self
Conventional path following	Post-conventional path following
Achievement is goal related as are rewards	Achievement is process and goal related as are rewards
Limited avenues for self-fulfilment	Focus on actualization of self and others

Source: Adapted from Harung, 1996, p. 24

adopt the habits of lifelong learning and see new skill demands as opportunities not threats.

To encourage learning, BAA focuses on meeting customer needs, sharing “best practice” and by managing the accumulation of knowledge which supports the organization’s core competences, identifying “new” learning opportunities. Further, the organization is geared to “benchmark” against world-class business performance and align its organizational processes and management practices so that improvements in all areas can be implemented without impediment. BAA’s interest in the concepts and realities of the learning organization stems from this and its own belief that the capacity and willingness to learn will be in competitive terms, the most critical success factor in the twenty-first century.

Theme 1: modelling the learning process in organizations

Buckler (1996) reviews the importance of: *focus* (to plot a course for the learning effort) the *environment* (which facilitates learning)

and the *techniques* (which enable learning to be efficient) and the relative contributions made by “taught” and “discovery” methods of learning. He depicts a journey (ignorance, awareness, understanding, commitment, enactment, reflection) and reviews: the role of leadership in creating a learning environment; questioning; developing a shared vision and ownership; enabling and removing barriers. After this, he presents and discusses: the learning support system (systematic, led, team and individual learning support, experimentation, learning resource information support); learning needs diagnosis; progress reviews and the company policy deployment process.

Buckler observes that learning effectiveness is dependent on the environment for learning and the efforts of organizational leaders and managers in creating, sustaining and encouraging the appropriate conditions for learning to occur. Mark Johnston believes that “... the quest for knowledge by individuals is the main driving force ...” and that the individual’s personal journey can be channelled via team learning and ultimately organizational

Table III The learning organization: concepts and realities

Authors	Focus	Theme
Buckler (1996)	Examines the process by which individuals in organizations learn, and develops a model to facilitate continuous improvement and innovation in business processes. The model is designed to be applied and used by managers	Modelling the learning process in organizations
Drew and Smith (1995)	Argues that radical change is more likely to succeed if attention is first paid to organizational readiness. Offers a framework for radical "change auditing" and "change proofing" the firm to increase its capacity to withstand and exploit unexpected and rapid change	Organizational readiness
Teare <i>et al.</i> (1997)	Presents case studies from 14 UK and US-based manufacturing and service firms. Provides an array of evidence that work-based teams are making a significant contribution to organizational learning	Teamworking and learning
Richardson (1995)	Examines the challenges for leaders of modern, networked learning organizations as they: strive to innovate and respond to marketplace conditions, develop through the medium of strategic alliances and explore ways of "getting more for less"	Networked learning
Peters (1996)	Considers the question: "What does a learning organization learn about?" and proposes a syllabus approach in six areas with steps for implementing it. Discusses action learning as a developmental methodology and offers recommendations for practitioners	A learning organization's syllabus
Hitt (1995)	Addresses the question "What does a learning organization look like and how does it differ from the more traditional organization?" Offers a systems view defined as "an organization that is striving for excellence through continual organizational renewal"	Organizational renewal

learning with the aid of facilitators and mentor support. He adds that the team leader should be a "disseminator of opportunity" and thereafter the learner should be encouraged to disseminate to the wider team by sharing newly acquired insights and knowledge. Johnston views this as the most difficult but ultimately the most rewarding aspect of teamworking. Chris Drabble relates Buckler's views on the learning environment to BAA's own vision for learning. He observes that BAA's efforts to become a learning organization are making a tangible difference to the culture of the company.

The "new" culture, facilitated by various empowerment tools is inevitably permeating the various parts of the company at a variable pace. Drabble believes that the pace of change is related to the depth of understanding and the varying degrees of acceptance in the minds and behaviours of the company's

managers. To address the issue, he suggests that a core strand of BAA's internal communications strategy might focus on explaining and reiterating the advantages of creating and sustaining a learning environment and its implications for ongoing business improvement. The scale of the challenge implicit in becoming a learning organization also raises the question as to whether BAA should be attempting to embed the new culture in all areas of activity simultaneously or whether an incremental style of change guided by the corporate vision might allow more rapid progress.

While most see the creation of a learning environment as the means of supporting the learning organization, especially in its early stages, Mike Speed warns that the environment itself is all too often a limiting factor as "... the people who 'fit in' will be those whose cognitive style aligns itself with

the organization's values and beliefs". Speed sees large traditional-style organizations which aim for consistency, efficiency and stability as relatively conformance-driven employers. Here, the characteristics of an individual with a preference for a "taught" learning style correlates closely with the qualities that are espoused in such organizations. The relatively "static" nature of their processes, procedures, structure, culture and behaviours serves to reinforce compliance and conformance to the unwritten norms that permeate organizational life. So, if a problem presents itself, individual managers and the organization as a whole will attempt to deal with it by applying its normative patterns and doing things better by adapting what they already do. Grant Thompson makes some similar points – he feels that conditioned responses (normative behaviour in "static" organizations) stifle empowerment and creativity. In contrast, Speed thinks that organizations with a more "dynamic" style and a preference for discovery and innovation are more likely to see organizational norms as part of the problem. If so, it is probable that individuals will be encouraged to find a better way of doing things:

It is an age old argument of whether to do things better or to do better things. With either extreme of style, an organization and its members will limit its own responses when confronting non-routine problems.

Speed uses this argument to advance the cause of teamworking with the aim of "unfreezing" the organizational mindset and avoiding decision making that is skewed to either extreme. At the heart of the matter is the self-reinforcing nature of organizations which so often fail to take account of the spectrum of cognitive styles. The problem can be traced to recruitment and selection which still tends to favour people who will "fit" the job and company as a whole. Those who interview and select are so often themselves steeped in a system that expects and rewards certain behaviour. It is partly for this reason that internal recruiters are trusted to make the "right" decision. In summing-up, Speed observes that in time and with appropriate support and possibly incentives, people can learn new behaviours, but of vital importance is the recruitment and selection process. If the learning organization is to take shape, Speed believes that this is a key conduit for new thinking and should be used to broaden the

organization's resource of cognitive styles rather than maintaining a comparatively narrow status quo.

Buckler contrasts the relative merits of "taught" and "discovery" methods of learning but according to Erwin Rausch, the sequence and interplay between the two is equally important. Rausch describes a diagram that he has found helpful in shaping his own approach to learning. He offers this as a foundation for organizational learning as well as a guide for the individual learner concerned with absorbing and integrating "new" learning with what is already familiar:

The diagram is a vertical, pyramidal spiral which starts at the bottom with "acquisition of new knowledge" then turns up to "demonstration of the new knowledge". On the third level is "personal application of the new knowledge" and on the fourth level of the spiral is "feedback". Thereafter the spiral repeats the same levels in ever smaller form, dramatizing the smaller amount that has to be learned before full knowledge and skill competence has been reached. Starting from this simplistic diagram, I have come to the conclusion that some "teaching" at the very beginning is necessary before "discovery", which is a combination of demonstration and personal application, can find fertile ground.

Rausch, an educationist with professional and publishing interests in learning, prefers taught elements in the form of sharply focused questions or guidelines based on a sound framework or model of the subject area. He adds: "... when learners explore how the guidelines apply in a specific situation or even a hypothetical scenario, there is a direction to 'discover' and far more learning can take place than if the 'discovery' lacks conceptual foundation and guidance."

Peter Rebbeck identifies with Buckler's schema of taught vs discovery models and feels that by taking a broad view, it is possible to derive benefits from both. Reflecting on a recent BAA project, Rebbeck provides a good illustration of mutual dependency:

BAA has been focused on improving the efficiency of its construction programme. We have been benchmarking the industry worldwide in order to identify where current best practice lies. Those involved have been using the "discovery" model to undertake the project. Following the initial phase, a series of handbooks and guidelines were produced which mainly use the "taught" model so that our project staff can acquire "new" knowledge. The advantage here has been to "level the playing field" in a consistent and speedy manner. The next challenge is to build on current best practice and deliver

world class performance by encouraging pioneering projects which break new ground in process and technology terms. Arising from this, BAA has to learn to cope better with the challenges and opportunities of experimentation.

Rebeck sees much scope for improvement ahead and several current challenges arising from the combined taught-discovery approach but first, the stages of what Buckler calls “commitment” and “enactment” have to be achieved – this is not so much to do with the “it’s not my job” syndrome but the “whys” of learning. Second, construction professionals are by tradition and expectation, wedded to the taught model. The discover model is alien to them and yet if they are to acquire new knowledge they need to adopt this approach to build on their existing base of expertise.

Elaine Saunders provides an interesting example of learning by discovery during a fire drill when participants are normally expected to conform to a taught pattern of behaviour:

The best fire practice I have ever been involved in at BAA occurred shortly after I joined the company and, for reasons unrelated to the fire drill, two exits were blocked ... it took valuable time before people “woke up” and thought about what they were actually doing and found an alternative exit. People seemed to learn far more from this exercise than they had from many other “conforming” taught methods.

Saunders makes the point that especially in situations like this, creative thinking to address the unexpected has a small but key role to play in addition to conforming with best practice ground rules on the steps that should be followed in the event of a fire. Commenting from Australia, Elysabeth Leigh, an educationist, observes that the fire drill example reflects both a problem and an opportunity for learning in learning organizations.

Leigh describes this as a tension between taught skills and discovered knowledge:

... the problem/learning opportunity as I encounter it in university classes – is the stress that emerges when adults are first encouraged to question habitual behaviours. In a recent class – part way through a semester-long simulation – this erupted into sustained debate about the “radical” nature of the learning process being encountered ... I used the metaphor of the Israelites’ “golden calf” which was made when Moses “abandoned them” for three days and they were desperate for some sense of “certainty” in the midst of the fearsome uncertainty of an alien and vast “desert”. While understandable – I suggested – as a sign of human fears, the “calf” (a short-term sign of security and “normality”) ensured they wandered for 40 years in

that same desert. Another student then suggested that the timespan ensured all those involved (at an adult level) were dead and those who arrived in the promised land were ready for the new life and structures and values required. The metaphor seems to have worked, at least as a means of causing those fixated on “tangibles” to re-consider their own needs in this context.

Leigh says that she is careful to avoid criticism and tries to open-up dialogue between the two ends of the learning spectrum. She adds that these ideas may have wider relevance with the tension between the two ends of the spectrum requiring a continuing exercise of “moving towards balance”.

Responding to Elysabeth Leigh’s “fire drill” observations, Grant Colligan, a member of BAA’s Fire Service, says that he has used the taught model throughout his career but in fact, the discovery model is widely used. However, Colligan believes that the interplay between the two methods has yet to be adequately developed in the workplace and that BAA’s strategy for learning will encourage this. Rounding-up the discussion, Laurence Matthews observes that the fire drill illustration “... points up the difference between actually learning something and learning what you were supposed to, which was presumably the agenda in the minds of the organisers of the drill”. Matthews also comments on Leigh’s point about the “tangibles” of learning. “There are obvious psychological needs for the individual, but it also seems to be a factor in marshalling external approval for the effort – e.g. proving the worth of learning to the budget holder ...”

Theme 2: organizational readiness

Drew and Smith (1995) interpret focus, will and capability as: the organization’s knowledge and awareness of potential change, its willingness to address such change and its abilities to exploit and withstand change. They review the contribution of benchmarking (learning); action learning; organizational climate (development); commitment to supporting continuous learning and creativity. To conclude, they present a change audit approach for diagnosing needs re: organizational learning and developing initiatives to enhance organizational capacity for change. The approach is illustrated by referring to IKEA’s response to opportunities for growth in international markets.

David Towler responds to Drew and Smith's article with an array of points that he feels have been omitted or should be approached in a different way. First, he notes that managers generally have a full workload and that it is unrealistic to seek to overlay a "change audit" and expect managers to perform as normal. Peter Rebeck makes this point too and readily sees a connection between managers being too busy to handle the "now" and the "future" at the same time. Second, Towler believes that change is more readily achieved by the individual and, extending outwards, the behaviours of groups of individuals who collectively determine organizational behaviour. To get this far – convincing individuals of the need to change the organization (and not the other way around) and to maintain momentum, Towler asserts that the learning organization must be founded on three fundamental principles – trust, honesty and integrity – mentioned just once in the article. Roy Truett makes a similar point and says that he values honesty, openness and clarity when it comes to explaining the reasons for change.

'...A learning environment is also costly in the sense that it must be properly supported if learning is to become part of the individual's working life...'

Towler observes that many organizations try to build a learning environment on top of a culture that is traditional, hierarchical and competitive and then they wonder why their efforts fail. Who, for example, is going to commit themselves to action learning, building a shared vision and team learning if they see their colleagues engaging in "old" culture politics and succeeding, possibly at the learner's expense? A learning environment is also costly in the sense that it must be properly supported if learning is to become part of the individual's working life. Among other things, it means that management systems have to be re-gearred to learning outcomes that are seldom easy to predict in conventional terms. How then might the behaviours of individuals be channelled so that a culture of learning is reinforced? Towler believes that competences contribute to a learning organization in two ways. First, as individuals build on their own

portfolio, it adds value to the learning process as a whole. Second, competences (as specified by NVQ and MCI among others) provide a clearly defined process standard for doing a given job or series of tasks and this is crucial to achieving high level performance. Drew and Smith fail to make this point, nor do they comment on the role of appraisal systems, particularly 360-degree appraisal that can be related back to the underlying principles of trust, honesty and integrity. Towler feels that it is feasible to implement a system of empowerment founded on process standards so that freedom to manage is seen as the outward sign of the learning organization's inner values – a key indicator of a true learning environment.

Drew and Smith propose that organizations should designate a chief change officer (CCO) and in the context of organizational learning, Paul Davies questions whether this role should be part of the remit of the human resources function or a separate, more neutral role. Jon Phillips feels that a CCO should have a wider remit so as to draw on external as well as internal considerations. He proposes a semi-independent "think tank" that is not accountable to any specific function within the company. Further, it would need to be sufficiently liberal minded and radical in outlook to encompass a wide range of perspectives and a rich variety of inputs in terms of the seniority, function and geographical location of its members. Phillips suggests that an MBA action learning set meets these criteria and Davies agrees that the think tank role would accelerate the learning of both the set and the organization.

Turning to change proofing and specifically change audits, Andrew Elliott wonders whether the concept is seen as nothing more than a form of insurance by senior management. Jon Phillips believes that the need for intelligent and thorough environmental scanning has never been more important for companies whose business objectives are threatened by external pressures. He believes that awareness is part of the solution, but willingness to respond is more often the key challenge. A key question is when does a threat become real and enduring rather than merely a further obstacle that must be overcome? This is a particularly appropriate question for the aviation industry as it participates in the current debate about airport expansion. Elaine Saunders identifies a set of strategic-

level questions that BAA should seek to answer (relating to the proposed Terminal 5, key customers and the prospect of Government interventions) and feels that a wider set of “group think” ideas might be facilitated by holding an open, internal session via intranet and thereafter, ideas might be filtered, sorted and actioned as appropriate. Grant Colligan agrees and feels that there is scope for a different form of contingency planning by deriving inputs from the active learners that BAA is sponsoring. This accords with the notion of a learning organization that is striving for excellence through continual renewal.

Theme 3: teamworking and learning

Teare *et al.* (1997) consider the rising importance of the “process paradigm” as a means of improving service and responsiveness and an “ingredients of change” programme (management commitment; education; measurement; recognition; regeneration) promoted by the National Society for Quality through Teamworking. The authors provide case illustrations and outcomes that reflect the activities of teams formed to address and solve problems or to identify improvement opportunities which have been identified and given to the team. They are single project teams that usually disband on completion of the given task; outcomes from self-directed team projects and cases of organizational commitment to total people involvement with quality and employee activities as key elements.

Elaine Saunders relates the article to BAA’s own team initiatives and wonders whether teamworking has been over-emphasized, to the point where people feel compelled to work as part of a group even when the work they are doing might be better carried out independently. Despite this, Gary Smith sees a divide opening up between those who manage or supervise others (and are encouraged to attend teambuilding courses) and the supervised workforce as a whole who do not generally attend courses about teamworking. He feels that there should be a team dynamics course that is open to all so that the benefits of teamworking are more widely understood and the inputs that individuals can make are better stated. Siew Kam Soon reinforces this point by relating the variety of inputs to the efficiency of the group effort. Here, different learning styles and preferences encourage individuals to learn from each

other and play to the various strengths in any given group.

‘...different learning styles and preferences encourage individuals to learn from each other and play to the various strengths in any given group...’

Elaine Saunders relates team outcomes to the need for wider recognition and observes that BAA’s appraisal systems do not appear to take account of the individuals’ contribution to cross-disciplinary team effort. She suggests that a “learning log” approach might be adopted so that the project leader can write comments in the individual learning logs of team members. As members move from project to project, they accumulate entries in their personal learning log that enable individuals to reflect on their own learning and on what they have been able to contribute to the team and second, his or her line manager can take account of this in one-to-one appraisal meetings. The learning log “profile” might also provide a helpful indicator of the comparative maturity of teams throughout the organization. If individuals were required to make a specific number of contributions, each to different teams each year, the learning log would provide a meaningful basis for assessing overall team effectiveness. Beyond this, “effective” team members might be given more scope in selecting the projects they work on, together with other forms of non-monetary reward. Peter Rebbeck agrees and adds that the way in which teams are chaired should be reviewed so that a clearer understanding of how to “professionalize” the role emerges. He sees the key skill as being expert facilitation in the areas of timekeeping, encouraging involvement, effective resource utilization and optimal team member participation.

Theme 4: networked learning

The learning organization literature emphasizes the importance of “self-organizing, learning communities” in and around organizations. To keep pace, employees need to be encouraged to take more responsibility for creating and managing innovatory projects in contexts of depleted resource bases and from positions as network collaborators rather than

administrators. Richardson (1995) sees the notion of “empowerment” as central to the concept of the learning community culture and suggests a number of steps:

- (1) develop new top management perspectives on control;
- (2) design the use of power;
- (3) establish self-organizing teams;
- (4) develop multi-cultures;
- (5) present challenges and encourage risk-taking;
- (6) improve group learning skills;
- (7) create resource slack.

Further, he provides an illustrative case study: how a new leader has reformed success through the strategy of “organization as a network of facilitated learning communities”. After this, he suggests that informal networks utilize three types of relationship network based on advice, trust and communication needs and considers how to: avoid the pitfalls of the networked organization and understand the new skill requirements for managing in the networked organization. Two short case illustrations are provided: “headhunting the modern middle manager” and “orchestrating change from the middle”. The article concludes with a review of the personal development and reward packages needed to maintain managerial commitment and motivation.

Eric Sandelands likens the role of sponsoring networked learning to that of “midwife” to the learning organization. He profiles BAA’s aspirations to be a “virtual” learning organization at his Virtual University Press Internet site (<http://www.openhouse.org.uk/virtual-university-press/>). Elaine Saunders stresses the importance of firmly embedding the new style BAA learning culture as a precursor to becoming a truly empowered learning organization. She sees some parts of the organization changing more quickly than others and this is manifest in a sense of enthusiasm arising from new ideas like “creating successful teams” and “freedom to manage” in the airport terminals. Saunders is also encouraged by the comparatively recent introduction of courses designed to develop senior managers like “sharing the vision” and “growing the business”.

There was previously no real provision for on-the-job development apart from technical training and these courses provide a means of promoting in-depth thinking about the business and its long-term development. Roy

Truett says that empowerment is still viewed with a degree of suspicion because of the complexities of relating it to the needs, preferences and expectations of individuals throughout the company. He believes that a more visible reward package for all employees would help to overcome the barriers to its full adoption, including an element of performance-related pay with eligibility extended to all. Jennifer Anderson reflects on the means of communicating the principles of empowerment and believes that the information is available but that the message is inconsistent. She believes that the central message of empowerment should be communicated face-to-face either by managers to teams or in a roadshow format. Anderson stresses the importance of presenting a consistent organization-wide message: “... if the information is only readily available to more senior managers then the rest will only receive the picture that top management chooses to present and this, regardless of the ‘sharing the vision’ and ‘growing the business’ programmes is still varied in content and quality”.

The issues raised in the resource articles and the responses and examples given by participants at the Internet conference suggest that there is considerable scope for crafting and embedding a learning organization model that is meaningful and relevant to those who are actively engaged in the endeavour. A summary of the main recommendations arising from the discussion is given in Table IV.

Towards an agenda for learning and renewal

Peters (1996) proposes a syllabus-driven approach for the aspiring learning organization, inter-linking six areas which can be addressed by designing interventions for individuals, groups and organizational systems. The syllabus areas are:

- (1) Learning about the participant’s own job in the organization and how to do it better.
- (2) Learning how to create alignment between culture and strategy in the organization so that initiatives “fit” the context from inception to implementation.
- (3) Learning about the future by exploring the value of techniques for scenario planning and anticipating the likely implications for personal and organizational competency development.

Table IV The learning organization: some recommendations

Themes	Recommendations
Modelling the learning process in organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use internal communications to explain and encourage personal learning and to promote its application to ongoing business improvement. "Sell the benefits" as often and in as many different ways as possible, throughout the organization • Aim to recruit and retain people with different cognitive styles and skills to avoid "organizational cloning" • Aim to use taught and discovery methods, and where appropriate, a combination of both • Encourage creative thinking and its application to "opportunities for learning"
Organizational readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to enact change through individuals rather than "overlying" an agenda for organizational change on the workforce as a whole. Use workplace learning founded on core values of trust, honesty and integrity to encourage personal development • Establish one or more independent action research sets to examine future scenarios and implications. Draw the set membership from people with different learning styles, skills and from a variety of organizational functions
Teamworking and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the benefits of teamworking as widely as possible and link individual inputs to team outputs via the appraisal process. Use a learning log to enable team members to reflect on the effectiveness of their own inputs. Establish targets for team participation (ongoing and different teams) and encourage shared learning
Networked learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to embed a culture of learning by devoting time and resources to developing a wider and deeper understanding of the concept of empowerment. Link this to on-the-job training and development, explain and communicate the benefits at all levels of the organization and emphasize the benefits to individuals as well as the organization

- (4) Learning about the operating environment and the supply chain – essentially Peter Senge's "fifth discipline" of systems thinking.
- (5) Learning how to challenge existing schools of thinking and avoid myopia so that personal and organizational mindsets are open to change and to new ideas.
- (6) Developing an organizational memory for the purpose of capturing, storing and retrieving knowledge and expertise.

The syllabus is for the organization as a whole and its members who should participate according to their personal learning agenda and the organizational imperative. However, the sequence of its implementation is of some significance. Peters suggests that the learner's own job should be the starting point, as improvements here will yield organizational benefits from the outset. After this, the longer-term debates should be established

about the future, future competences and how to network learning throughout the organization's supply chain. The framework also provides a basis for monitoring the kind of organizational adjustments needed to maintain creativity and productivity and for routinizing improvements by creating and drawing on a knowledge base that constitutes the organization's bank of knowledge capital. In essence, the learning organization is one that has found a workable and meaningful way of systemizing organizational learning and all its component parts (see Figure 1).

Hitt (1995) emphasizes the purpose of a learning organization in his definition "... an organization that is striving for excellence through continual organization renewal" (p. 17). He adapts the McKinsey 7-S framework to provide a systems view of the learning organization:

- Shared values – excellence and organizational renewal.

- Leadership style – catalyst.
- Team – synergistic so that members learn together and provide a greater value than the sum total of individual contributions.
- Strategy – learning map with scope for discovery and adaptation.
- Structure – dynamic networks.
- Staff – people who want to learn, preferably throughout their careers.
- Skills – generative learning.
- Measurement system – a balanced score card approach using critical success factors to emphasize and measure: excellence, organizational renewal and financial performance.

Illustrative critical success factors include:

- excellence (e.g. conformance to specifications, zero rejects, on-time delivery, customer satisfaction);
- organizational renewal (e.g. cross-functional teamworking, the value of learning networks, working with customers, suppliers and other organizations, staff development, investment in research and development, process redesign, continuous improvement); and
- financial performance (e.g. meeting revenue, cost, profit contribution targets).

In summing-up Hitt observes that the learning organization is a new paradigm that reflects a process rather than an end state.

He observes:

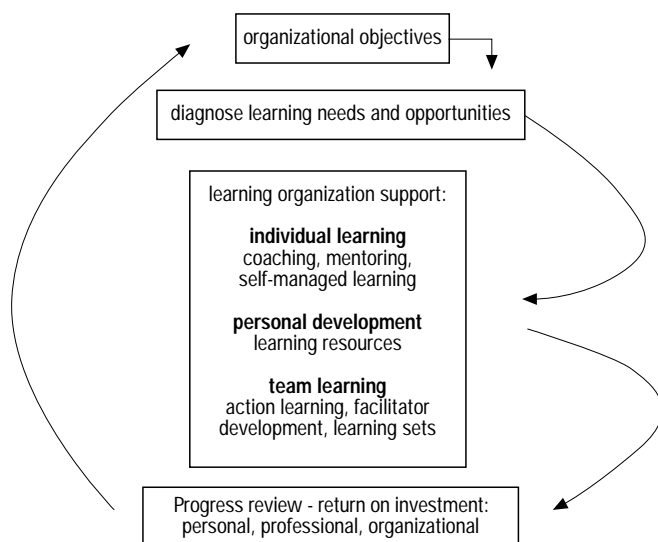
Embracing and implementing the paradigm of the learning organization will be no easy task.

There will be obstacles. And one of the most challenging obstacles will be to overcome the resistance of those managers who have fully embraced the traditional organizational paradigm – and are successful. Why should they change? There is an important reason why they should change. And that is the quest for excellence. In this quest, managers want to know how to achieve excellence and how to maintain it. The learning organization points the way: excellence through organizational renewal (Hitt, 1995, p. 25).

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Figure 1 Systemized organizational learning



Source: adapted from Buckler (1996 p. 37).

“The Learning Organization – Concepts and Realities” (1997), contributions from participants at an Internet conference held in association with BAA plc and Fina plc, Top Management Global Forum at: <http://www.mcb/co.uk/topman>, 20 April–1 July.

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Appendix: The Learning Organization – Concepts and Realities (1997)

Internet conference held from 20 April–1 July 1997 at the Top Management Global Forum at: <http://www.mcb/co.uk/topman> in association with BAA plc and Fina plc

Theme 1: modelling the learning process in organizations

Buckler (1996) examines the processes by which individuals in organizations learn, and develops a learning process model to facilitate continuous improvement and innovation in business processes. The model is designed to be applied and used by managers working in organizations. The article discusses: learning as a process that results in changed behaviour and the “hows” of learning (techniques to help the learning process) (pp. 31–3); the “whys” of learning – creating an environment which provides meaning and the “whats” of learning – enabling a focus on organizational goals (pp. 33–6); a learning process model.

Sub-set discussion points:

- (1) As you read the article, highlight or underline significant points and note down own personal reactions: think about your own learning: what works best for me? my team colleagues?
- (2) Contrast the taught and discovery models of learning (Table I, p. 32). Discuss the extent to which elements of both models support (or impede) workplace own learning and organizational learning. (Note: consider the interrelationships between focus, environment, technique (Figure 1, p. 32) as they apply to your own learning needs.)
- (3) Consider the learning process model (Figure 4, p. 37) in relation to your own personal and organizational setting and needs. How might the model be implemented? What refinements and/or additions are needed? What else needs to be considered?

Theme 2: organizational readiness

Drew and Smith (1995) link organizational learning with strategies for effecting corporate transformation and make the key point that radical change is more likely to succeed if attention is first paid to organizational readiness. They offer a framework for radical “change auditing” and “change proofing” the firm to increase its capacity to withstand and exploit unexpected and rapid change. The article presents: a model for organizational change and learning (pp. 5–7); learning and the three-circle framework (pp. 7–8); a change audit, change proofing and organizational learning (pp. 9–12).

Sub-set discussion points:

- (1) As you read the article, highlight or underline significant points and note down own personal reactions: What caught your attention in this article? What good ideas does it contain?
- (2) Review the questions in Tables I, II and III (p. 9) and relate them to your own experience and knowledge of organizational readiness. Consider whether aspects of the three elements (focus, will, capability) are in your view, relatively under- or over-developed. Discuss the reasons for this.
- (3) Read the “indicators of balance, congruence and harmony” (Table IV, p. 10) what organizational responses might you recommend? (Own team, own department/section, wider perspective or all of these.)

Theme 3: teamworking and learning

Teare *et al.* (1997) present case study findings from 14 UK and US-based manufacturing and service firms, most with mature teamworking structures. Taken together the findings provide an array of evidence that work-based teams are making a significant contribution to organizational learning, performance improvement and corporate renewal. The article addresses: processes or functions? the role of teamworking; total teamworking; single problem, management promoted projects; continuous improvement, self-directed team projects; frameworks for organizational learning.

Sub-set discussion points: Review the main features and principal outcomes of:

- (1) Single problem, management promoted projects.

- (2) Continuous improvement, self-directed team projects.
- (3) Frameworks for organizational team-working.

Discuss the extent to which each of the three teamworking structures might be used to promote the benefits of organizational learning (use case examples from the article to support your views.) Summarize your discussion with some specific recommendations.

Theme 4: networked learning

Richardson (1995) examines the challenges for leaders of modern, networked learning organizations as they: strive to innovate and respond to marketplace conditions; develop through the medium of strategic alliances and explore ways of “getting more for less”. The article addresses: how to facilitate a learning community culture (pp. 4-7); how to intervene to improve informal networking (pp. 7-13).

Sub-set discussion points:

- (1) Review the “seven steps for managers” (How to facilitate a learning community culture, p. 5). Consider the implications for your: own management style; own organization. Conclude with some specific recommendations.
- (2) Read: Case study 1 (new organization in a formerly bureaucratic profession) (pp. 5-6). Consider the statement “... innovative organization design goes some way to resolving many of the problematic issues faced by more traditionally managed organizations”. What implications do you foresee for your organization? (See p. 6: and consider the relevance of: group-think; organizational paradigms; power and political issues).
- (3) Read: “How to intervene to improve formal networking” (pp. 7-8). What can we learn from this approach? How can we apply it? What are likely benefits and problems?