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# Transforming the rhetoric of organisational learning to the reality of the learning organisation

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## Abstract

It has become generally accepted that "people and not capital add the competitive edge" (*The Sunday Times*, 17 November 1996). This belief is often put into practice through the use of frameworks of organisational learning and the concept of the learning organisation. These are invariably packaged as initiatives which promise competitive advantage through people. Within this context the paper considers the rhetoric associated with the learning organisation and other frameworks of organisational learning. The research confirms the hypothesis that reliance on rhetoric alone can be dangerous and costly and identifies the problems associated with this approach. The paper recommends a solution which is embodied in the Molecular Development Model together with the "Learning" checklist. Together they enable organisations to become more effective in transforming themselves into learning organisations as well as providing a theoretical and conceptual tool useful in the education and development of managers.

## Introduction

Much has been written about the concept of the learning organisation (Burgoyne *et al.*, 1994; Garratt, 1994; Gordon *et al.*, 1994) and some attempt has been made to translate the concept towards a practical focus by Critten (1994), Roderick (1993) and other writers. The formation of the European Consortium for the Learning Organisation (ECLLO) according to Campbell and Cairns (1994) "signals that the term 'learning organisation' has more or less officially entered the vocabulary of many managers".

However,

Entering the vocabulary of managers is not the same as operationalising and implementing organisational learning to gain competitive advantage ... what is lacking is a convergence on a definition capable of application to many organisations plus guidelines to help implement the ideas (Campbell and Cairns, 1994).

The management paradigm of the learning organisation, however, has not gained wide acceptance in isolation. The philosophy of the principles of human resource management (HRM) during the last decade has contributed to the acceptance that "people and not capital" add the competitive edge (*The Sunday Times*, 17 November, 1996).

Initiatives such as total quality management (TQM), business process re-engineering, performance-related pay and empowerment have all been embraced by businesses seeking to achieve a competitive edge. The use of initiatives has, arguably, been the most prolific in the field of development and includes approaches such as Investors in People (IIP), the Competency Framework and its embodiment in the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) standards. These have proved attractive to organisations and in many instances are perceived as a route to becoming a learning organisation, or indeed (in some instances) synonymous with the learning organisation.

The increasing realisation that maximising human potential is a vital source of competitive advantage in the changing economic climate is expressed by Cassels (1991):

One may conclude that training and human resource management generally – may be seen working ... at a deeper level and concerns developing corporate capability so as to enable the company both to perform well immediately and to develop in the future in such a way as to improve its market position.

Similarly Senge (1990) states:

As the world becomes more accessible and even the smallest companies can obtain whatever skills and technology they need at reasonable cost, the only source of competitive advantage is an organisation's ability to learn and react more quickly than its competitors.

The above assumptions are supported by rhetoric which preaches the concept of "excellence through people" (Storey, 1995) and the unquestioning acceptance that any investment in the human resource will inevitably enhance organisational performance. Furthermore notions such as learning environments, lifelong learning and continuous development, have facilitated the interest in organisational learning. Within this context identifying and supporting a clearer route to take organisational learning towards the learning organisation through management development (MD) and human resource development (HRD) initiatives are increasingly important, with "competitive success" as the ultimate goal.

The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the relationship between organisational learning and the learning organisation and to provide some insight into the problems encountered in negotiating the route from one to the other. In so doing we propose a way forward which can be used by organisations to facilitate the transformation of organisational learning to the learning organisation.

## Background

Most of the theoretical underpinnings of HRD initiatives have derived from HRM concepts. These have widely debated and largely centred on the nature of models, theories and principles (Beardwell and Holden, 1994; Goss, 1994; Storey, 1995). The implications generated by the HRM debate have, in the case of HRD, been interpreted for practical application through initiatives (such as the learning organisation) and "sold" through the channel of rhetoric. Practitioners may question the benefits of a conceptual academic model; however, they can readily embrace it when packaged as an initiative which promises the benefit of enhanced competitive advantage. This raises the question of how practitioners go about getting the information on which they base their practice when adopting and implementing these initiatives.

West (1994) states:

"...learning organisation" is a comparatively new term for a complex set of ideas which have been present for a long time. It broadly encompasses the concept that successful adaptation to change and uncertainty is most likely to occur when sufficient and appropriate learning takes place throughout the organisation all the time.

Management literature and case studies contribute to the debate about the benefits of organisational learning and the learning organisation. However, much of this discussion is couched in rhetorical themes and as Pfeffer (1994) argues does not draw attention to the importance of organisational culture and capability in securing competitive advantage.

Case studies taken from the literature together with findings from primary research underpin the discussions in this paper which relate the rhetorical themes to the reality of organisational learning and the learning organisation. The debate is further developed by drawing on two research projects. One focused on organisational learning through the implementation of MCI standards and their perception by participant managers. It is based on the findings obtained from 61 managers in organisations which were participating in MCI standards at the time. The second project investigated the use of initiatives in the development of people with an emphasis on IIP and the learning organisation. The sample size consisted of 60 organisations, which had already demonstrated a degree of commitment to investing in their people, by supporting their staff to pursue professional qualifications.

Therefore the main issues that are now addressed are:

- The relationship between organisational learning and the learning organisation.
- The dissemination of information about organisational learning and the learning organisation.
- The problems encountered in organisations.
- Ways to overcome the problems.

## The relationship

In order to discuss organisational learning and the learning organisation the distinction and relationship of these terms need definition.

The importance of learning and knowledge is generally accepted as of increasing significance among management theorists. Drucker (1993) sees traditional factors of production such as labour, land and capital as secondary with the only meaningful resource today being knowledge. This acknowledges the relevance of the debate on organisational learning and the learning organisation.

Academics offer several definitions of organisational learning including the process by which “organisations change their cultures and systems”, “capacity or process within any organisation to improve performance based on experience” (Burgoyne, 1995) and Argyris and Schon’s (1978) three levels of learning with the third level being:

deutero double loop learning – involves learning to learn by the organisation so that mechanisms are in place for this process to continue into the future ... provides a blueprint how the learning organisation should behave in practice.

Argyris and Schon (1978) thus postulate that it is deutero double loop learning that needs to take place in the learning organisation.

Based on these definitions we have arrived at our own working definition which suggests that organisational learning can take a number of forms from induction training which introduces individuals to the organisation’s structure and culture, through the acquisition of skill and knowledge to the dissemination of knowledge. Our research into organisational learning is encompassed within this definition.

In summary organisational learning is where learning takes place that changes behaviour of individuals or groups within the organisation.

At what stage is transformation of organisational learning to a learning organisation achieved?

A number of writers have attempted to explain the concept (Critten, 1994; Garratt, 1994; Jones and Hendry, 1992) through the use of models. Others provide frameworks (Burgoyne *et al.*, 1994; Critten, 1994) which emphasise the outcomes but pay little attention to the process.

According to Campbell and Cairns (1994) the majority of definitions focus on: the importance of acquiring, improving and transferring knowledge; facilitating and making use of individual learning; and

modifying behaviour and practices to reflect that learning.

It is the last of these that leads to the description offered by Burgoyne (1992):

A learning organisation continually transforms itself in a process reciprocally linked to the development of all its members.

An attempt towards a further clarification is offered by Tjepkema and Wognum (1996):

Learning organisation responds to (and anticipates) changes in the environment by proactive organisational learning; moreover, it deliberately aims at improving its ability for learning

and

in order to learn on an organisational level a learning organisation makes use of the learning of all employees, therefore it strives to create a work environment which stimulates and supports learning.

Thus our working definition of the learning organisation is where learning is taking place that changes the behaviour of the organisation itself. Hence organisational learning has reached the stage of successful adaptation to change and uncertainty through the development of new solutions.

### Acquisition of information

This section considers how organisations acquire information about organisational learning and the learning organisation. Competence, MCI, IIP are used as examples of organisational learning initiatives.

### Organisational learning

The publication of the MSC (1981) publicly disseminated the phrase competence with its main rhetorical theme of “a flexible and adaptable workforce to cope with the uncertainties which cloud the future”. It included a key phrase “At the heart of the initiative lie standards of a new kind” (MSC, 1981). In time the “new standard” became “competence” and a new form of rhetoric was born. This concept was adopted by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ, 1989) which aimed to be “effecting an improvement in vocational qualifications by basing them on standards of competence required in employment” and further reinforced the rhetoric of competence.

Critten (1994) extols the benefits of the competence route as

- enabling employment needs to be specifically identified;

- enabling employers and staff to recognise and acknowledge achievements;
- providing a route for accrediting experience;
- providing opportunities for development and career progression.

These ideals of competence are available both to employers and employees as an attractive package promising work related training to the employer tailored to meet his needs, often without the added cost of attendance at a college course. The employee enticed by recognition, through a national currency, of previously acquired knowledge and skills.

The rhetoric of competence extended its influence into the realm of Management Education and Development as a result of the influential Constable and McCormick (1987) and Handy *et al.* (1987) reports. The MCI Crediting Competence package launched in 1991 stated that these standards “form the basis of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in management which are available from various awarding bodies” and that “Employers recognise the standards as good working practice – they reflect the real world and the actual jobs within it” (MCI, 1991).

Again the message is national recognition for employees and improved performance for employers.

Results of our primary research confirm that organisations are readily persuaded by benefits of competence and MCI. The most common benefits expected by participant managers were:

- Gaining national qualifications – 89 per cent.
- Improving ability to implement changes – 76 per cent.

This supports the notion that the message within the rhetoric is successful adaptation to change, leading to competitive advantage. Information is disseminated chiefly by the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and implies that the learning organisation is achievable through this route since the outcomes promised are similar in both initiatives.

The IIP initiative was launched in 1991 against a background of growing concern about potential skill shortages and the need for better vocational education and training to improve business performance. IIP aimed to provide a framework and national benchmark for training and development activities which are directly linked to business needs. IIP

publicity (Finn, 1994) offers something for everyone: TECs, employees, chief executives – even academics. Its seemingly attractive features are:

- a human resource initiative about business improvement;
- HRD being involved in a learning cycle with business planning;
- explicit encouragement of training and development;
- requirement that HRD is focused on individuals, teams and organisations;
- the need for training and development activity to be evaluated (Finn, 1994).

Case study research (IDS, 1993) suggested anticipated benefits of IIP to be auditing existing training and development practices against a national benchmark, linking training to business objectives, demonstrating commitment to employees leading to improved motivation (particularly important in major change), enhancing reputation and improving quality.

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Our research findings confirmed that in the case of IIP, 84 per cent of organisations stated that rhetoric played a part in the decision to pursue the initiative. The main sources of information were:

- TECs – 86 per cent.
- Consultants – 71 per cent.
- Popular management journals – 62 per cent.
- Management courses – 61 per cent.

The most frequently anticipated organisational benefits of IIP were:

- Improved motivation – 95 per cent.
- Improved employee awareness of business objectives – 95 per cent.
- Closer link between training and business goals – 80 per cent.

These findings confirmed that information related to IIP was being successfully disseminated through TEC advertising and that anticipated outcomes were the link between learning, motivation, business planning and

business improvement. Indeed this could well be seen as a clear route to the learning organisation.

### **The learning organisation**

Critten (1994), Roderick (1993) and other writers have attempted to unravel the concept of the learning organisation towards practical application. Roderick (1993) suggests learning organisations can learn and react faster than their competitors. Jones and Hendry (1992) draw attention to the link between organisational learning and improved performance. Empowerment is highlighted as important (Roderick, 1993) in learning organisations as a driver which enables the organisation to better respond to change. Organisations undoubtedly perceive such rhetoric as desirable.

Similarly a debate rages on the preconditions necessary for success (Pfeffer, 1994; Roderick, 1993; Sharratt and Field, 1993). Burdett (1993) suggests that organisations need to think in new ways, to leverage new tools, to travel through new territories and to reframe organisational assumptions. No mean task for the average organisation.

Notwithstanding these challenges 84 per cent of our sample was interested in the concept of the learning organisation. However, only 10 per cent claimed to have adopted the concept in practice and only 0.25 per cent were able to report on process of implementation. The conclusion that can be drawn from this seemingly conflicting result, is that the notion of the learning organisation is indeed attractive but that organisations are unable to transform the rhetoric into a process which can be evaluated throughout implementation.

The main sources of information identified for the learning organisation were:

- Popular management texts – 59 per cent.
- Popular management journals – 56 per cent.
- General business press – 52 per cent.
- Management education – 51 per cent.

More than 60 per cent of our sample believed that the benefits of the learning organisation are that learning becomes a mainstream activity, continual learning leads to continual change and learning facilitates response to change.

These findings again confirm that it is the potential benefits that are disseminated to

organisations and are seen as attractive. However, problems are encountered in achieving these benefits in reality.

### **Problems encountered**

#### **Organisational learning**

A literature review identified some of the problems encountered. The dissemination of information relating to competence frequently failed to address the need for a support network required for the development of the competent worker. The need for line managers to take on new roles as assessors and facilitators is not highlighted. This need often necessitates the development of new skills in all employees. “The challenge ... is to create assessment regimes in the workplace compatible with work realities/cultures” (Bell, 1990). Moreover, the language of competence requires interpretation. In order to achieve success the whole infrastructure of the organisation has to be addressed.

Tovey (1994) takes the concept of cultures on board by identifying a tailored strategic approach to competency with priority given to the structure and culture of the organisation. McCrimmon (1995) states that in the fast changing markets more attention needs to be paid to the input skills and less emphasis directed at managerial role and hierarchy.

Pilot studies highlighted additional problem areas. According to Parkinson and McBride (1992) five preconditions had to be met, i.e. organisational acceptance of the process, the essential need for support mechanisms, including a structure, a clear evaluation of outcomes and a strong orientation to learning. These preconditions further stress the need for a culture to support learning. They also encompass some of the holistic elements of organisational development (OD) congruent with Steers’ (1988) definition of OD:

Organisation Development ... is an ongoing system-wide development approach. It seeks to improve both productivity and efficiency on one hand and the quality of working life on the other.

Sinclair and Collins (1992) contest that the appropriate skills, attitudes and outlook cannot be delivered in the “ideal” of competence. Others question aspects of the MCI competence approach but support the view (Parkinson and McBride, 1992) that competence-based management training has to be

integrated into other HR initiatives. His view is therefore moving us forward towards an integrated development model.

Findings of primary research focusing on the MCI, support the concept of an integrated development model. They show that all responding human resource professionals were aware of a range of management development programmes and considered the issues of competence, mentors, trained verifiers and assessors (infrastructures) as the three most important issues relating to the successful implementation of management standards. Additional issues identified as contributing to the successful implementation of the programmes were:

- Clear organisational direction.
- Management development activities related to work.
- Meeting the requirements of the business.
- Involvement of participants' line managers/senior managers in the process.
- Measuring effectiveness.

These issues are again the essence of OD and according to Legge (1994) are reasserting themselves under the guise of cultural management.

Respondents to the research project, however, reported that those issues were not being taken on board. The fact that only 39 per cent of respondents were aware of the MCI prior to participating in the development initiative suggests that organisational acceptance of the process and an integral culture change was not present at the time of introduction of the programme. This lack of integration is further demonstrated by the 11 per cent of candidates who were unable to identify the award they were working towards whereas all training managers were party to this information.

These findings confirm the need for the MCI to be integrated in the broader human resource development plan and the dissemination of the MCI/competence philosophy through the organisation.

In line with other organisational learning initiatives the anticipated benefits of IIP are clearly articulated. What they do not address are the preconditions for success. These, according to a range of sources are, top management commitment; communicating the idea and benefits to all staff; involving staff in the process; pre-assessment diagnosis; examination and clarification of resource and process issues. All our respondents were fully

aware of the need to fulfil the first three but placed less importance on process and resource issues (79 per cent and 64 per cent agreement, respectively). Similar findings were reported by Gordon *et al.* (1994)

Case study research into IIP suggests that organisations expect culture change to be an expected positive outcome of IIP. Although 74 per cent of our sample agreed with this, the problem was that there was very limited change in roles and attitudes reported during the IIP process. This implies that organisations place too much reliance on the IIP process as a means of challenging the way things are done, rather than installing the right infrastructure prior to implementation.

Other problems experienced by organisations (IRS, 1994) included convincing managers of the benefits and getting them to contribute to ownership of the initiative. All our respondents agreed that training and development should be universally "owned", but few reported that this had happened. The need to improve training evaluation and to more closely relate training to business needs was supported by 86 per cent of respondents but only 64 per cent reported that this had happened. Additionally 45 per cent reported that the increase in evaluation had been ineffective.

The IRS survey (1994) reports that lack of top management commitment is a serious but not extensively reported problem. All of our sample agree it is vital.

Process problems (Gordon *et al.*, 1994) identified are those of the terminology, inappropriate procedures and inadequate preparation. Our research again reflects this with only 58 per cent of organisations reporting that they had taken the necessary steps to ensure preconditions were in place.

### **The learning organisation**

Organisations are clearly attracted to the idea of the learning organisation as demonstrated in our research findings where 84 per cent of respondents believed it to mean improved organisational learning leading to better response to change. However, incomplete understanding of the concept through lack of clarity in the rhetoric leads to problems.

Hayes *et al.* (1988) suggest that failure can result from "traditional measurement and control systems tending to discourage the kind of experimentation that leads to

learning". Difficulties in implementation are further exposed by Sharratt and Field's research (1993). Asking the question "Hollow rhetoric or attainable reality?" they found *inter alia* that organisation structures were too rigid, managers had limited awareness of the potential of technology to support learning, traditional values could be a problem, learning involved little reflection and was individual rather than concerted and that commitment was largely seen as lip service.

Our research findings provide further credence to this viewpoint with respondents having a much greater awareness of the need to address cultural issues in implementation (80 per cent) than structural issues (50 per cent).

The problems lie not only with implementation but also with understanding the concept itself. This is demonstrated by 65 per cent of our sample who expect that becoming a learning organisation means that people will be developed to their full potential. Over half the respondents envisage learning and work being synonymous, the organisation continually transforming itself, continual learning and change and learning to be fundamentally different. These findings suggest that not only are a significant number of organisations interested in the idea of the learning organisation (84 per cent of our sample), a considerable proportion perceive themselves to have taken the concept on board. What appears to be problematic is the failure to recognise where they are in the process or even whether they have embarked on the route.

The problems may to some extent be explained by organisations' inability to define appropriate timescales (Senge and Kofman, 1993) but this research indicates the overall problem is more complex. Lack of a clearly defined concept, together with vague analysis of the inputs and processes involved let alone some measurable outcomes can mislead businesses to either accept a variety of interventions which promise competitive advantage as being the learning organisation and therefore, in the final analysis be disappointed by unfulfilled promises. Alternatively they may search for a non-existent ideal.

### Common themes

The problems identified in this section relate to the implementation of organisational learning initiatives and the learning organisation. These can be summarised as:

- Difficulty in interpreting some initiatives; outcomes were promised but the route was not clear.
- Lack of clarity of some outcomes making evaluation impossible.
- Inappropriate/rigid organisational structures/systems.
- Inadequate auditing/diagnosis (of behaviours, skills, values, systems) at the outset.
- Insufficient time scales.
- Difficulties experienced as a result of the implementation of HRD initiatives in isolation.

The need is therefore to respond to the call by Campbell and Cairns (1994) to provide a clear definition of organisational learning and the learning organisation capable of application together with guidelines for implementation.

### Overcoming the problems – towards the learning organisation

Do the problems experienced indicate that organisations should not strive to become a learning organisation as they are unlikely to achieve complete success? Alternatively should organisations refrain from embarking on any organisational learning initiative the benefits of which are extolled through the TECs, academic or popular journals? The answer is "No". However, total reliance on such rhetorical information should be avoided, since, in the main, it focuses on expected outcomes without paying sufficient attention to both the process and inputs necessary for success. By the time this omission is recognised it is usually "too little too late".

How, therefore, can organisations start working towards achieving the benefits of the learning organisation? "The journey depends on how we begin and where we want to go" (Hein-Soreusen and Neergaard, 1996). By identifying the problems experienced by organisations in the implementation of organisational learning and the learning organisation our research has led us to the cognizance that what is currently available is prescription of the form that a learning organisation should take. This provides an ideal to strive for (Guile and Young, 1996). However, what is also required is a practical tool which allows organisations to ascertain where they are and to determine what they want to achieve,

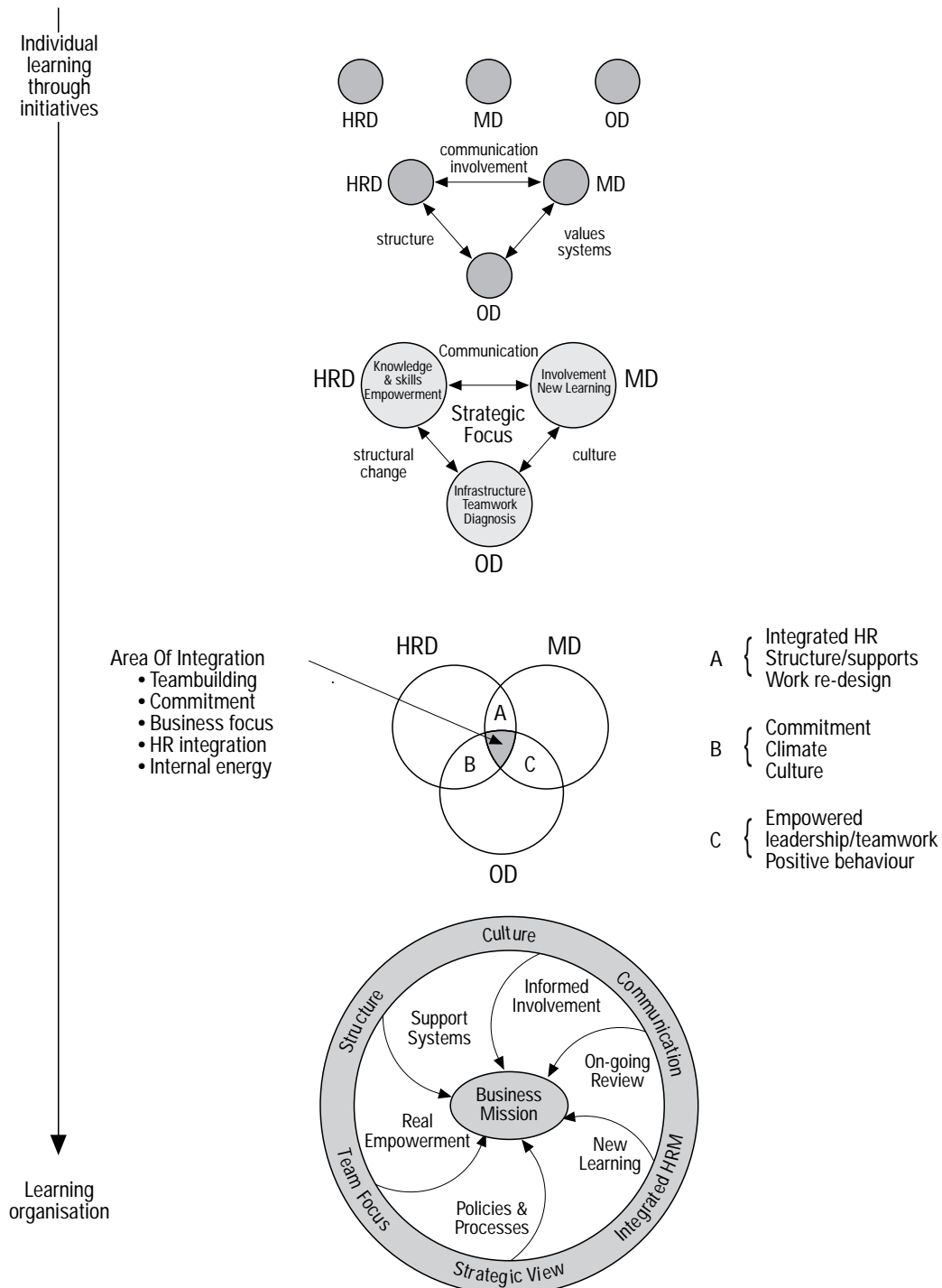
together with a realistic plan of how to get there.

With these objectives in mind we have developed our molecular development model (see Figure 1). This model is a working model which takes account of flaws in current practice. It acknowledges the reality that in many companies development activities occur in isolation. It then depicts the way in which organisations can work towards greater

integration of the three areas encompassed by MD, OD and HRD. Our research findings highlight that the closer the integration between these areas the greater the likelihood of organisations achieving their expected outcomes. Hence equal attention has to be paid to each.

The model therefore portrays the phases of development an organisation may find itself in according to the degree of integration of MD,

Figure 1 Molecular development model



OD and HRD. It thus acknowledges the reality of different starting points, allowing organisations to ascertain where they are. Organisations can then chart their individual rates of progress and identify the end point towards which they wish to work. The model embraces the “ideal” through its emphasis on integration and continuous review of three areas of activity towards the strategic goal.

Where organisations wish to transform organisational learning to the learning organisation, the model stresses the need for the creation of the appropriate structures, cultures, support systems and learning, in all three development areas. It is submitted that once this approach is adopted by the organisation it will lead to organisational learning gaining its own momentum leading to integrated development becoming the norm.

The name of the model, Molecular Development Model, was chosen because its analogy with molecular bonding, where stability of molecular structures positively correlates with the strength of interaction between molecules (valence). For organisations the molecules correlate with the separate areas of development activity and the bonds represent the appropriate structures and supports necessary to make those activities successful. Strengthening those bonds enhances cohesiveness thus moving the organisation closer to the learning organisation.

To assist with the implementation of the model we have provided The “Learning” checklist. The checklist is seen as a tool to be used when implementing any organisational learning initiative, which is aimed at facilitating, in the long term, the achievement of the learning organisation.

### The “learning” checklist

The questions organisations need to address are:

- Learning – has it been assessed/reoriented?
- Evaluation – is a process of continuous evaluation incorporated?
- Agreement – is there universal agreement in the understanding of the initiative?
- Realistic – is the time scale for implementation realistic?
- Networks – are appropriate support networks established?
- Integration – is there integration of development activities with policy and practice?

- Need – has the need to change structure/culture been considered?
- Gained – has senior management commitment been gained?

The learning checklist draws on the preconditions necessary for success identified in literature and on primary research findings.

The reassessment/reorientation of learning highlights the need to identify learning enhancers and inhibitors (Roderick, 1993), to encourage experimentation in learning (Hayes *et al.*, 1988) and the need to incorporate reflection in the learning process (Sharratt and Field, 1993). The need to assess and reorientate learning is also supported by 73 per cent of our respondents who saw the learning organisation as new ways of learning and work. To achieve this aim organisations may wish to audit their current learning opportunities and to introduce a range of opportunities that support the learning needs and preferences of all employees, such as open learning, coaching, mentoring and interactive learning. The new learning opportunities need to meet the desired behaviours, skills and values.

The process of continuous evaluation is demonstrated in those organisations who see themselves as having successfully achieved the desired outcomes (Mayo and Lank, 1995). This is illustrated through the relative success of IIP and supported by 88 per cent of our respondents who believed that one of the benefits of IIP is that training is evaluated more effectively.

As discussed earlier in this paper organisations were experiencing difficulties in transforming the rhetoric into practice which is, in part, attributable to an incomplete understanding of the initiative. Therefore agreement on the understanding of the initiative has to be reached through effective channels of communication and feedback. The concepts, processes, individual and organisational benefits need to be fully communicated.

A range of literature relates to realistic time scales (Senge and Kofman, 1993), support networks (Bell, 1990; Gordon *et al.*, 1994) and integration of development activities with policy and practice (Mayo and Lank, 1995; Parkinson and McBride, 1992). Only 41 per cent of our respondents reported that integration of development activity with business plans took place. This emphasises the need for organisations to address this issue through

an alignment of their HRD policy with business strategy.

The need to change structure and culture in line with any change is widely debated (*inter alios* Heracleous, 1995; Tovey, 1994) and 84 per cent of our respondents believed a learning culture, which would anticipate change, to be one of the benefits of becoming a learning organisation. To this end organisations need to identify what beliefs and values need to change (Heracleous, 1995). Similarly the importance of gaining management commitment is reported both in the literature (Dolan, 1995; IRS, 1994) and by 100 per cent of our sample. In reality it is easier to achieve where the “champion” of the learning organisation (often an HR professional) is at a senior level in the organisation.

The checklist therefore steers the organisation to address the problem areas identified in our research and it, together with the “molecular development model”, will ensure that development initiatives are not implemented in isolation.

### **Sounds good but does it work?**

Reports from a variety of organisations support the model and checklist. Based on research at English Nature, Dolan (1995) reinforced the view that successful companies concentrate on learning new skills. The assessment of the appropriateness of current skills and learning is therefore an essential first step. Furthermore he reported that those companies making most progress in working towards the learning organisation were those that had undergone extensive restructuring by introducing new systems from the start. In this way they ensure appropriate support networks together with appropriate value systems.

The success of ICL (Mayo and Lank, 1995) in being acknowledged as a learning organisation is in part attributed to the process of continuous evaluation. Support for the need to agree on the meaning of an initiative is provided by Schein (1993) who stated that the importance of ensuring everybody fully understands the initiative cannot be underestimated.

As well as the need to recognise that learning takes place over time, literature relating to the management of change emphasises the time scale of up to six years for change to be embedded. Yet many organisational initiatives

are abandoned well before any benefits can be realised.

The experience at ICL (Mayo and Lank, 1995) supports the notion of the need to integrate learning to business goals. They demonstrate their integration through the formation of individual learning plans, learning teams and the use of information technology in the sharing of knowledge and experience.

Cultural issues and the need to gain senior management commitment are well documented in literature and were recognised in much of our research as needing to be addressed. The experience of Hay Management consultants further supports the proposition that in order to achieve success in organisational learning an analysis needs to be made of the current organisational structure followed by an evaluation to identify which beliefs and values need to change, which ones need to be strengthened and where resistance to change is most likely to occur (Heracleous, 1995). In relation to gaining management commitment Dolan (1995) found that successful companies which had achieved an innovative approach to learning had tried to affect a threshold number of staff, so that changes became irresistible. He went on to identify the support of senior managers as the first step in achieving this success, and perceived them as role models for the rest of the organisation.

These reports thus support the notions of the model and the checklist and pave the way to the further consolidation of the findings through planned action research.

### **Conclusion**

Both the Molecular Development Model and the “learning” checklist acknowledge that organisations take on board various notions of development through people and accept the associated outcome of competitive success. In order to achieve these outcomes, however, companies need to create conditions which result in new behaviours in the organisation and provide a route through which the behaviour of the organisation as a whole changes. In this way the desirable outcomes can become a reality.

The benefits of the model are twofold. First, it provides practitioners with a route to greater success when implementing HRD/MD initiatives. Second, it can be used as a management education tool designed to

redress the balance in how practitioners are informed about developments in HRM. This approach should help to bridge the gap that still exists between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality.

The checklist is a tool which aids implementation of the concepts represented in the model. Through addressing issues raised in the “learning” checklist it is envisaged that not only will the human resource development needs be recognised but also the development needs of the organisation.

The model and checklist demonstrate that development of managers, human resources and the organisation are inextricably linked and demand equal attention. Only in this way can value be added to the organisation and real learning take place. Thus a route is established through which the rhetoric associated with organisational learning is transformed into the reality of the learning organisation.

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