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Olivier Serrat
Asian Development Bank

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Dimensions of the Learning Organization

Abstract

{Excerpt} If organizational learning is still seeking a theory, there can be no (and perhaps cannot be) agreement on the dimensions of the learning organization. Even if the dimensions were understood, the connection between learning (or lack thereof) and performance remains unclear. However, regardless of the disputed state of the art, a multilevel, practical but necessarily exploratory and simple framework of common and individual variables associated with learning and change follows. Here as elsewhere, experimentation has an important role to play. Individual and collective learning are not about finding out what others already know, even if that is a useful first stage—it is about solving problems by doing, reflecting, connecting, and testing until a solution forms part of organizational life. There is no stock answer nor is there a single best approach.

Keywords

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

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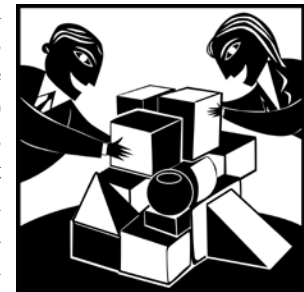
by Olivier Serrat

Organizational learning is still seeking a theory and there can be no (and perhaps cannot be) agreement on the dimensions of the learning organization.

However, useful models associated with learning and change can be leveraged individually or in association to reflect on the overall system of an organization.

Background

If organizational learning is still seeking a theory, there can be no (and perhaps cannot be) agreement on the dimensions of the learning organization. Even if the dimensions were understood, the connection between learning (or lack thereof) and performance remains unclear.¹ However, regardless of the disputed state of the art, a multilevel, practical but necessarily exploratory and simple framework of common and individual variables associated with learning and change follows. Here as elsewhere, experimentation has an important role to play. Individual and collective learning are not about finding out what others already know, even if that is a useful first stage—it is



about solving problems² by doing, reflecting, connecting, and testing until a solution forms part of organizational life. There is no stock answer nor is there a single best approach.³ Figure 1 suggests concepts that can be used individually or in association to reflect on the overall system.

The purpose of science is not to analyze or describe but to make useful models of the world. A model is useful if it allows us to get use out of it.

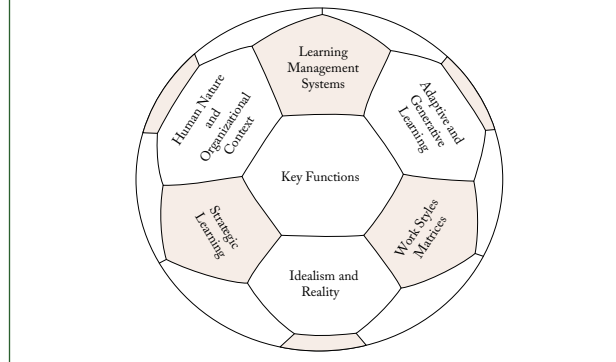
—Edward de Bono

¹ Most organizations know little about where they lose knowledge, so the costs of lost knowledge are largely hidden. As a result, there is no clear ownership of the problem and little value is given to knowledge-sharing activities.

² Some streams of open systems theory reject problem solving as unproductive, instead preferring to work on desirable futures and necessary actions (only “solving problems” as they become barriers to a goal). The difference in the outlooks is significant.

³ A parallel can be found in the disparity of systems models for organizational design. Those used often in the last 20–30 years have included McKinsey’s 7-S Model, Galbraith’s Star Model, Weisbord’s Six Box Model, Nadler and Tushman’s Congruence Model, and Burke-Litwin’s Causal Model. Each of these shines a particular light on an organizational system, in the way perhaps that astronomers standing on different planets would examine different configurations of the universe. No one perspective is correct. The choice of model depends also on how complex its user wishes it to be. In recent years, less inward-looking (closed system) models have been developed.

Figure 1: Dimensions of the Learning Organization

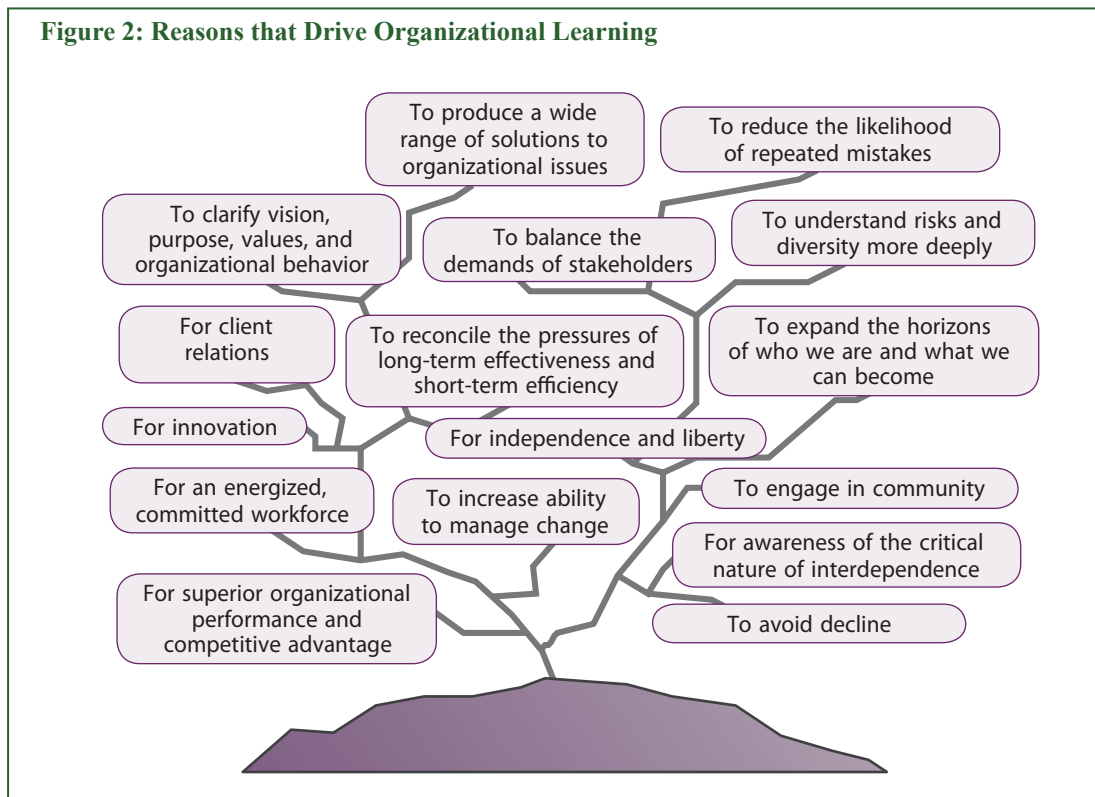


Source: Author.

Why Become a Learning Organization

Figure 2 provides a matter-of-fact, multidisciplinary argument for why one might want to create a learning organization.

Figure 2: Reasons that Drive Organizational Learning



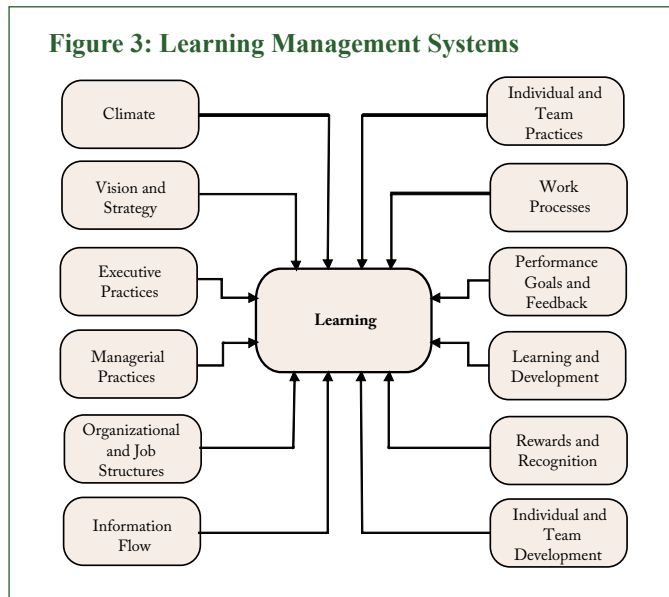
Source: Author.

Learning Management Systems

At the simplest level, one might consider the critical applications that would allow an organization to recognize its learning orientations and, from there, mark out the structures that affect how easy or hard it is for learning to occur. Figure 3 isolates 12 key learning systems from a managerial, somewhat top-down, perspective.

Key Functions

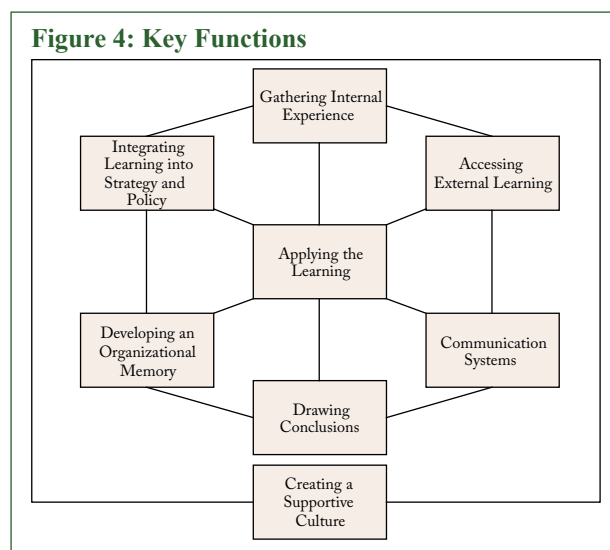
The literature on learning organizations suggests that certain key tasks must be undertaken for an organization to learn effectively. Figure 4 presents a set of competences that might need to be developed to support learning, largely from a functional perspective.



Source: Author.

Adaptive and Generative Learning

It is also helpful to demarcate some dimensions of the learning organization in terms of adaptive and generative learning, the two most commonly cited distinguishing characteristics of organizational learning. Table 1 selects a few attributes of learning primarily from a structural perspective.



Source: Britton, B. 1998. *The Learning NGO. International NGO Training and Research Center Occasional Paper No. 17.* Available: www.intrac.org/docs/OPS17.pdf

Table 1: Adaptive and Generative Learning

	Adaptive	Generative
Strategic Characteristics		
• Core competence	• Better sameness	• Meaningful difference
• Source of strength	• Stability	• Change
• Output	• Market share	• Market creation
• Organizational perspective	• Compartmentalization	• Systemic
• Development dynamic	• Change	• Transformation
Structural Characteristics		
• Structure	• Bureaucratic	• Network
• Control systems	• Formal rules	• Values, self-control
• Power bases	• Hierarchical position	• Knowledge
• Integrating mechanisms	• Hierarchy	• Teams
• Networks	• Disconnected	• Strong
• Communication flows	• Hierarchical	• Lateral
Human Resources Practices		
• Performance appraisal system	• Rewards stability	• Flexibility
• Basis for rewards	• Short-term financial rewards	• Long-term financial and human resource development
• Focus of rewards	• Distribution of scarcity	• Determination of synergy
• Status symbols	• Rank and title	• Making a difference
• Mobility patterns	• Within division or function	• Across divisions or functions
• Mentoring	• Not rewarded	• Integral part of performance appraisal process
• Culture	• Market	• Clan
Managers' Behaviors		
• Perspective	• Controlling	• Openness
• Problem-solving orientation	• Narrow	• Systemic thinking
• Response style	• Conforming	• Creative
• Personal control	• Blame and acceptance	• Efficacious
• Commitment	• Ethnocentric	• Empathetic

Source: McGill, M., J. Slocum, and D. Lei. 1992. Management Practices in Learning Organizations. *Organizational Dynamics*. 22 (1), pp. 5–17.

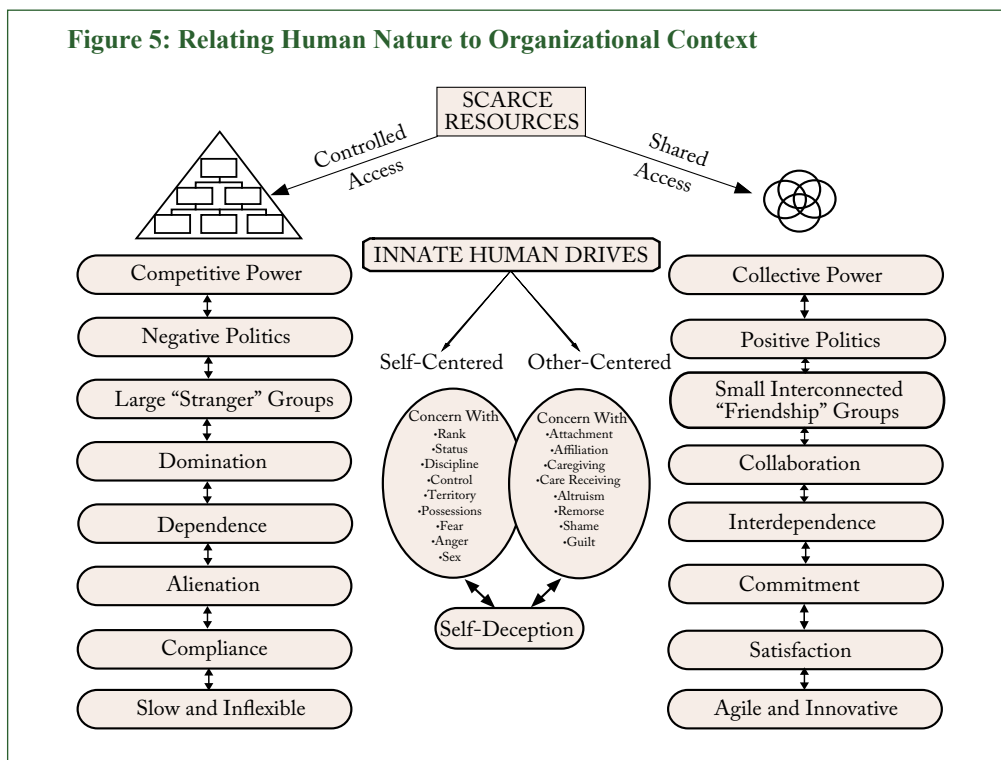
Relating Human Nature to Organizational Context

Social capital is the stock of active connections among people, that is, the mutual understanding, shared values and behaviors, and trust that bind members of networks and communities, making cooperation possible. The social cohesion that results is critical for societies to prosper and for development to be sustainable. The literature on social capital is vast but the idea of looking at social capital in organizations, not society, is relatively new. Here, the argument is that social capital makes an organization more than a collection of individuals. Charles Ehin offered a comprehensive framework to understand how human nature supports or undermines

voluntary workplace collaboration and innovation.⁴ Figure 5 outlines several vital considerations pertaining to the functioning of organizations from a social capital perspective.

Strategic Learning

Organizational learning must be understood as a pattern in a stream of decisions. How does strategy form in organizations? The various types of strategies uncovered in research can be located somewhere between the ends of a continuum along which real-world strategies lay. The most common might be labeled “planned,” “entrepreneurial,” “ideological,” “umbrella,” “process,” “unconnected,” “consensus,” and “imposed.” The results will either be intended or realized. More interestingly, Henry Mintzberg distinguished deliberate



Source: Ehin, C. 2000. *Unleashing Intellectual Capital*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

strategies—realized as intended—from emergent strategies—patterns or consistencies realized despite, or in the absence of, intentions. Figure 6 reveals how strategy formulation that walks on two feet—one deliberate, the other emergent—can inform strategic learning.⁵

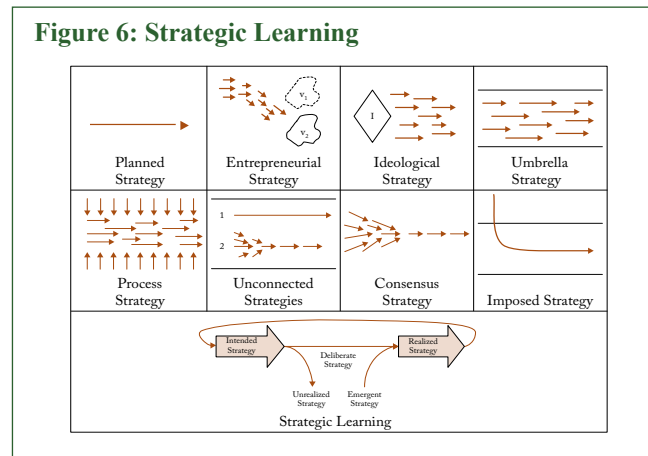
Work Styles Matrices

Ultimately, learning must be customized to the circumstances of an organization and the work it conducts. Each organization is different, but the work styles of any organization fall under four models: process, systems, network, and competence. Figure 7 highlights the characteristics of particular work settings and hints thereby at the learning needs of each. In brief, the process and systems models correspond to work settings that are routine

⁴ Ehin, C. 2000. *Unleashing Intellectual Capital*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

⁵ Still, notwithstanding the intuitive sense of Mintzberg’s approach to strategy learning, failing to grasp thoroughly the influence of power on the strategy-making process can severely inhibit the potential of strategy making as a vehicle of organizational learning. Views of organizations as cohesive entities are unrealistic and unhelpful, and it is vital to recognize the plethora of interest groups that inevitably compete to shape an organization’s direction.

Figure 6: Strategic Learning



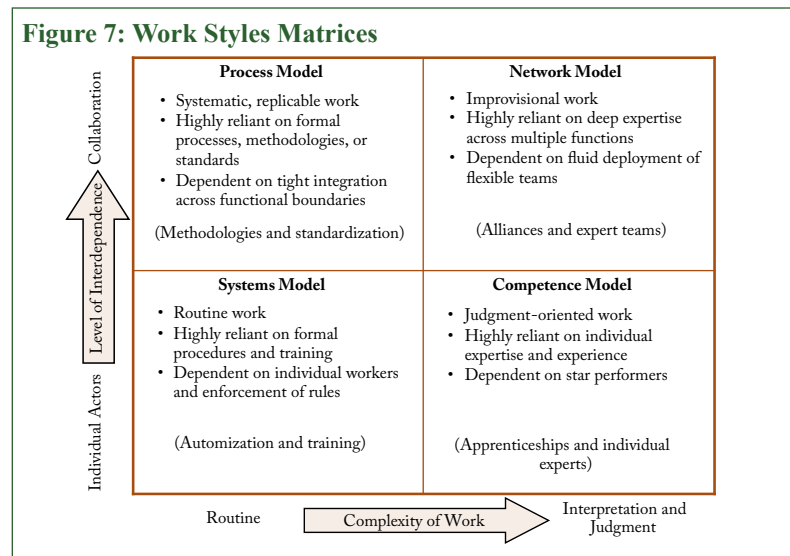
Source: Compiled from Mintzberg, H., and J. Waters. 1985. Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent. *Strategic Management Journal* 6 (3). pp. 257–272.

and require little interpretation. What is needed to perform tasks is know-how; learning takes place through generalized learning and development training with the help of how-to guides. Evaluation and other reports can help as well. However, the network and competence models call for much higher levels of judgment and depend on deeper understanding and insight as well as an ability to improvise. Work on policies, strategies, programs, and projects fits in these domains.

Idealism and Reality

Without denigrating concepts of systemic thinking—since a better appreciation of the whole and the interrelationship between the parts will lead to more pertinent action—development agencies have a long way to go before they reach the ideal of learning organizations. Table 2 segregates dimensions of the learning organization based on Peter Senge’s ideal and the reality in the field mainly from a technicist perspective.

Figure 7: Work Styles Matrices



Source: Adapted from Pickering, A. 2002. *Knowledge Management: New Research from the Institute for Strategic Change*. Cited in Hovland, I. 2003. *Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning, An International Development Perspective: An Annotated Bibliography*. Working Paper 224. London: Overseas Development Institute. Available: www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp224.pdf

Table 2: Idealism and Reality

The Ideal	The Reality in the Field
<p>Discipline 1: Personal Mastery—individual growth and learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational staff members feel undervalued by the organization; there are few individual incentives for learning. • National staff members and local actors are important sources of local knowledge and vital for learning but are often excluded from learning efforts. • Southern knowledge is incorporated ad hoc at the tactical, rather than strategic, level.
<p>Discipline 2: Mental Models—explicit articulation of tacit knowledge (ingrained assumptions) about the organization and how it works in the wider world</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tacit knowledge is all-important at the field level, with field staff showing a bias toward informal learning and social networking. • Explicit knowledge is seldom in the right form or in the right place at the right time—it is always in catch-up mode.
<p>Discipline 3: Shared Vision and consensus inspiring and motivating staff members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aid sector lacks clarity and consensus about objectives, responsibilities, relationships, and outcomes at all levels. This carries through to the reference points and frameworks necessary for understanding and assessing performance, and can diminish staff motivation for learning.
<p>Discipline 4: Team-Based Mastery—learning through improved communication, and openness to creative thinking through reflective conversation and dialogue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is inadequate support for management and leadership in the field. High staff turnover and inadequate procedures result in constantly changing teams. • Continual demands from head office for information "from the field" create tensions that make learning difficult in many organizations.
<p>Discipline 5: Systems Thinking—focusing on interrelationships between parts of an organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning cycle of reflection before, during, and after activities is poorly developed and unsupported at the field level, which creates problems for systems-based approaches. • Most aid agencies make no attempt to learn from recipient populations—a fundamental omission.

Source: Ramalingam, B. 2008. *Organizational Learning for Aid, and Learning Aid Organizations*. Available: www.capacity.org/en/journal/feature/organisational_learning_for_aid_and_learning_aid_organisations

Further Reading

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For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

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Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries substantially reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

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Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions