

A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

A “learning” organization is dedicated to continuous improvement in both employees as individuals and in the organization as a business or community. This is continuous improvement, not as a “program”, but as a way of life on-the-job. Learning is a continuous part of the job. It is regarded as vital to the success of the organization, and is supported by whole systems of training, information, customer involvement, and reward.

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OVERVIEW:

Organizational learning is widely considered to be an imperative of business in modern times. Yet, little consensus exists on how best to move an organization towards this type of behaviour. Here for consideration is a proposition about three (3) developmental attributes of a “learning” organization.

First and foremost, the form of organization embodies continuous learning as part of its ongoing activity, and all members of the organization have an opportunity to take an active role in managing the future. (See *Good Reading*, Weick & Sutcliffe: “[Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity](#)”.)

Secondly, a set of values and beliefs about change, awareness, openness, critique, interdependence, uncertainty, and ideal-seeking, are the foundation of a shared organizational culture which makes corresponding behaviours the norm. (See Emery: “[Active Adaptation: The Emergence of Ideal-Seeking Systems](#)”, Vol. III Trist/Tavistock Anthology.)

Thirdly, intelligence about environmental trends is continuously developed, and there is a shared understanding throughout levels of the organization about how present and future trends are affecting prospects of organizational and individual success. (See Emery & Trist: “[The Causal Texture of Organizational Environments](#)”, Vol. III Trist/Tavistock Anthology.)

As Graham Lowe writes in his book “[The Quality of Work](#)” (see *Good Reading*), “the central blind-spot in discussions of learning organizations is the failure to recognize that many workplaces are not designed to promote learning as part of the job”. Jobs, themselves, in many workplaces are not designed to encourage the use of newly acquired skills. In the words of Trevor Williams in “[Learning to Manage our Futures](#)” (see *Good Reading*), “how an organization’s members learn and with what results depends on the characteristics of the organization’s basic social design”.

Organizational “learning” is a metaphor. Organizations learn only through the learning of their members, employees and managers.

In our program “[A Learning Organization](#)”, continuous improvement is employee-driven. Involvement in continuous improvement is part of everyone’s job as a steelworker, for example. People are expected

and remunerated to continually advance their job skills and knowledge. Employees manage the organization's internal process of continuous quality improvement, and they have written most of the standards that govern quality control.

Continuous improvement is not a "program" in this organization. Rather, it is built into the design of jobs that are broad in skill and deep in complexity and discretion. The organization was 'born' with the belief that participation is essential to success. It was a whole systems design for "high performance" and "total involvement". Three vital support systems for continuous learning have been information and communication, training, and variable pay.

Information about the business, systems development, and customer service is continuously gathered and shared within the organization, in small bits on a daily basis in "face meetings" between crew and plant leadership, and in larger bits on a monthly basis in regular workshops and "town hall" meetings of all on-site operational management and employees. Most importantly, information about the production process and customer needs is accessible instantaneously to front-line employees on-the-job, so that employees use this information to control the production process 'just-in-time'. What can facilitate the development of user-friendly information systems is the involvement of front-line employees and staff in the design of such IS programming, (see *Good Reading*, Painter: "[Socio-Technical Design of Knowledge Work & IT](#)").

Front-line employees are not just recipients of business "intelligence". Regularly, employees visit customer and supplier facilities to see the results of their work first-hand, and to dialogue with their customers and suppliers about possible areas for improvement. Front-line employees know the face, and not just the e-mail address, of many of their counterparts on the shop floor or in the office of their customers. Then, in monthly workshops that are part of everyone's job, employees, process coordinators, engineers, and managers jointly create solutions.

Learning is continuous, not just about the business, but also personally and individually, in terms of one's work-related skills and knowledge. A hefty 12% of the wage bill is invested in employee training. (In research about "[Good Jobs & New Technology](#)"—see *Good Reading*—the most successful organizations invested 8-12% of their wage bill in ongoing training.) Most job-related learning is done with peers, guided by substantial documentation. The belief is that to teach someone is to learn from someone.

One of the most sophisticated support systems in this organization is the way in which employees (at all levels) are paid for what they know, rather than for what they do. The system is referred to as "Pay & Progression" or "Pay for Skills". The other part of remuneration that impacts upon the attitudes and focus upon continuous learning is "Gain-Sharing" pay for performance. In this organization, gain-sharing is not a "program". It is an item of continuous discussion, revision, and negotiation, according to the emerging business and employee priorities. (See *Good Reading*, "[Benefits of Variable Pay within a High Performance Work System](#)".)

Aside from the extraordinary business results that this organization creates, what has evolved are New Roles for workers, supervisors, and managers. Even though there remains some physical labour components of shop floor work, these blue-collar workers have become "knowledge" workers, for whom a constant part of their job consists of analyzing on-line information to make immediate and often complex decisions, (individually and as a group), about how to operate or maintain the production process. Indeed,

all of the “inspection” force is composed of hourly employees who participate in a rotation through various operator stations in the plant.

As part of a whole system, supervisors and managers have also acquired non-traditional roles. The leadership that we see in this program is primarily at the middle-level of management. In a “learning” organization, this is the level that has two primary functions of leading the growth and innovation in organizational practices, as well as supporting the continuous learning of persons involved in the core work process (see *Good Reading*, Purser & Cabana: “[The Self-Managing Organization](#)”, and Painter: “[Beyond Teams](#)”).)

SAMPLE THEMES:

- i) To be effective and sustaining, development of a ‘learning’ organization needs to be the product of **Whole Systems Design**.
See: “[A Learning Organization](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 1, *High Performance Workplace*;
See also: “*Responsible Self-Management*”
Story 2: Chapter 1, *Total Involvement Organization*;
See also: “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 1, *A Participative Work System*;
See also: “[Engineering for Commitment](#)”
Chapter 1: *Systems-Thinking*
- ii) **Multi-Skilling** is often related to continuous learning and Pay For Skills systems.
See: “[A Learning Organization](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 2, *Multi-Skilled Flexibility*;
See also: “[Responsible Self-Management](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 2, *Flexible Multi-Functional Work Units*;
See also: “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 2, *Broad Skills & Job Rotation*;
- iii) Effective and well-supported **Training** systems are key to continuous learning.
See: “[A Learning Organization](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 4, *Training Systems*;
See also: “[Transforming Labour Relations](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 3, *Win-Win & A Learning Organization*.
- iv) **Information Systems** need to be designed to get information immediately and in a user-friendly format, to the people and roles closest to the source of control for the relevant issue or decision.
See: “[A Learning Organization](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 2, *Integrated Process Control*;
See also: “[Responsible Self-Management](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 3, *Operator=Knowledge Worker*
See also: “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 3, *Just-In-Time Decisions*
See also: “[Engineering for Commitment](#)”

Chapter 3: Choice in Technology & Systems.

- v) **Variable Pay** can provide a constant incentive for continuous learning and a time-sensitive focus for continuous improvement.
See: "[A Learning Organization](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 5, *Quality Pay-Offs*
Story 2: Chapter 3, *Pay & Progression*;
See also: "[Beyond Collision](#)"
Chapter 2: *Canadian Pacific Railway & Teamsters Rail Conference.*
- vi) In a 'learning' organization, **Employees & The Customer** are engaged.
See: "[A Learning Organization](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 3, *Employees & The Customer*
See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 5, *Open Management & The Business.*
- vii) Workers in a 'learning' organization are to varying degrees "**Knowledge**" **Workers**.
See: "[A Learning Organization](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 3, *Employee Ownership of Quality*;
See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"
Story 2: Chapter 3, *Operator=Knowledge Worker*;
See also: "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"
Story 2: Chapter 3, *Just-In-Time Decisions*;
See also: "[Engineering for Commitment](#)"
Chapter 5: *Social System Design.*
- viii) Absolutely vital to the support and nurturing of a 'learning' organization is commitment and application of **New Roles for Supervisors & Management** that emphasize growth and innovation as important, ongoing work of the organization.
See: "[A Learning Organization](#)"
Story 2, Chapter 5, *Total Learning Environment*;
See also: "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"
Story 1: Chapter 5, *Team Leaders & Management*;
Story 2: Chapter 4, *New Roles for Supervisors*;
See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 5, *Open Management & The Business*
Story 2, Chapter 4, *Process Coordinators*
Story 2, Chapter 5, *The Role of Management*;
See also: "[Engineering for Commitment](#)"
Chapter 5: *Social System Design.*
- ix) **Extraordinary Results** are the continuous product of effective 'learning' organizations.
See: "[A Learning Organization](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 5, *Quality Pay-Offs*;
See also: "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"
Story 2, Chapter 5, *Extraordinary Results*;

See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"
Story 1, Chapter 5, *Open Management & The Business*;
See also: "[Engineering for Commitment](#)"
Chapter 6: *Legacy for an information Age*.