



DONALD MROZ

MOVING TOWARD A LEARNING ORGANIZATION THROUGH LEADERSHIP



DEDICATION

I hope this paper and the research within will add to the interest and intrigue of my colleague, Professor Werner Faix. It has been a pleasure working with Professor Faix to enhance the learning of SIBE students through our MBA program at Post University. I have found Professor Faix to be a creative, innovative scholar and wonderful thinking partner. I am proud to have been asked to compose this paper in his honor. One of my interests has been how organizations can become true learning organizations and what role leadership plays in that effort. This paper is dedicated to my colleague and friend Dr. Faix for his Birthday celebration.

PREMISE/INTRODUCTION:

In February of 2010 a top executive at Toyota's U.S. sales office in Torrance, CA declared that the automaker had discovered the exact causes of sudden acceleration in its vehicles: floor mats and sticking pedals. However, a few days earlier, executives from Toyota's regulatory office in Washington told congressional investigators that they could not be absolutely certain what was behind the problem. And the company's attorneys acknowledged shortly after the meeting that sticking pedals would not cause sudden acceleration. [Vartabedian & Bensinger 2010]. This is simply one small, but important example of why leadership and organizational learning must go hand in hand. Through instilling organizational learning practices, principles and good thinking it is possible to elevate organizations beyond contradictory statements, such as the example above, and that can lead to miscommunication/misinformation, health and safety issues, blame, scapegoating, lies, and clear statements of incompetence.

In this paper, my intention is to further reinforce the interdependence between leadership and organizational learning. Organizational learning was popularized by Senge [1990], however the field has been in existence since the early 60's and possibly earlier. Much has been studied and researched, and various implementation strategies have followed. Even with the various research studies, and implementation strategies/approaches we continue to see organizations make mistakes as noted above by Toyota with contradictory statements seeming to indicate that learning has not taken place at the organizational level. In 1996 this author [Mroz] devised a "Macro Model for Organizational Learning" while undertaking a grounded theory study with Senior level leaders. Much has transpired since that time with numerous research and studies being undertaken, strategies for organizational learning being devised, and many consulting opportunities with trial-and-error results, both positive and not so positive outcomes across industries and sectors.

This paper explores several of the research studies undertaken that link moving in the direction of organizational learning through leadership. In this paper, leadership is not only defined as the top leader, CEO or President, but at times references leaders at all levels including informal leaders and will be discussed as such. It is also posed here that organizational learning can take place within the larger organization, and in fact includes team learning, group learning and learning at a divisional level. Thus, organizational learning is a broad definition including mini and macro-organizations. The same can be said for leadership, in that it is leaders at all levels, both formal and informal. At the macro level, it is often stated that environment is the driving force for change within organizations. It is also often stated that senior leadership has the primary role in initiating an organizational learning effort due to their connectedness with the internal and external environments and their position of power [Mroz, 1996]. In this case we are talking of the larger, holistic organization, but there are instances where we see organizational learning concepts and practices taking place within an organization even if the entire organization is not undertaking those concepts and practices associated with an

organizational learning effort. Although this later statement may not constitute “organizational learning” as such, never-the-less there are instances of brilliance happening.

In addition to what has been stated thus far, this paper will explore the fringes of the trans-disciplinary scope of organizational learning, without calling it out as such, and the many overlapping and integrated synthesis of knowledge that have been applied to this field. It is no longer simply a field with boundaries, but rather a field that has had to integrate knowledge from the fields of psychology, positive psychology, biology, physics, cybernetics, organizational change/change management, human development, team effectiveness, sociology, and technology amongst others. And of course, the field of study has crossed virtually all sectors now from the private for profit to non-profits and governmental agencies.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING:

The literature contains numerous and varied definitions related to the concept of organizational learning, however since Senge [1990] helped to popularize the concepts and field, there has been a continuous effort to research and learn more about this fascinating and important field of study. Historically we can see various definitions and their evolution over time. [Duncan & Weiss, 1979. P. 84] state that organizational learning is “the process within the organization by which knowledge about action – outcome relationships and the effects of the environment on these relationships is developed.” Other definitions which have been important are...

Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error [Argyris, 1977, September, October].

Organizational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding [Fiol & Lyles, 1985, October].

Organizations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior [Levitt & March 1988].

And of course, Senge, [1990, p. 3] “Learning organizations are places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”

More recently we are seeing some closer agreement regarding definitions whereas there is a distinction between the learning organization and organizational learning. Amy [2007, p. 213] through research states “organizational learning refers to learning processes and activities that occur within the organization whereas a learning organization refers to a particular organizational form” [Lundberg, 1995; Ortenblad, 2001; Sun and Scott, 2003; Yeo, 2005]. Furthermore, according to Amy, much of the literature remains fragmented between academics and practitioners. Argote & Levine [2020] state that organizational learning occurs in a con-

text, whereas the context includes features of the organization and the environment in which it is embedded. Examples being the organizational structure, culture, technology, identity, goals, incentives, and strategy, as well as the characteristics of its members. One framework for organizational learning that is cited often in the research is that of Crossen et al. [1999, 2011] where organizational learning is formulated as strategic renewal incorporating four interconnected processes of intuition, interpretation, integration, and institutionalization that occur over the individual, group and the organizational levels. The premise is that intuition and interpretation occur primarily at the individual level, and that integration occurs at the group level while institutionalization occurs at the organizational level. This framework has been revised by some researchers however remains mostly intact as a relevant and sound model.

What is quite clear from the literature whether it is by practitioners or scholars is that organizational learning and the process of working towards becoming a learning organization have become important elements for organizational success. Mai [2004, p. 212] states that “learning organizations are about constant self-evaluation and about developing new approaches and practices to deal with the challenges of an ever-changing environment. This, in turn, invokes a paradox: successful organizations must strive both to standardize their operations around ‘best practices’ and, at the same time, to look constantly for more effective alternatives – better best practices, if you will – to achieve their goals.” The author of this paper has been involved in numerous efforts in a consulting capacity to help instill organizational learning concepts and practices within several organizations such as Ford Motor Company, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, Alcoa Aerospace, numerous School Districts and various other organizations. The intentions were always the same, either to improve what was already being undertaken, or to innovate to a new product or service. Efficiency has almost always been another factor that organizations want to improve upon, and instilling concepts of organizational learning can and has helped move in these directions. The key to much of this learning at the organizational level is sustainability. Benn, Edwards and Leppan [2013] have concluded through their research that knowledge sharing and generation tools in the form of selected boundary objects can promote development of communities of practice which can enhance the institutionalization of knowledge using the 4 I Organizational Learning Framework [Crossan, et al. 1999] as a guide to sustain the overall effort of organizational learning.

LEADERSHIP:

Leadership is a topic that has been quite thoroughly researched, studied, and has many theorists and practitioners providing various models of best practices. Some of this research has of course found its way into the area of organizational learning, and rightfully so. My own research focused on the Leaders role in organizational learning, and many others have focused on this topic in hopes of establishing frameworks for leadership to instill organizational learning concepts, and ultimate successes in how organizations learn, and/or become a learning organization. Vera & Crossan [2004] note that some of the frameworks have proposed

opposing continuums of leadership such as relations-oriented versus task-oriented [Fiedler, 1967], and directive versus participative [Heller & Yukl, 1969], in addition much has been written regarding transformational leadership vs. transactional leadership [Vargas, 2015]. As it relates to organizational learning it would appear that much of the research leans toward the models of transformational research and transactional research.

Vargas talks about the two types of leadership evolving into a blended model of strategic leadership and characterizes it as “ambidextrous” and that leaders must have the ability to move between the two modes of leadership style depending upon the situation. Both styles would seem to have their respective places within an organization where transactional leaders seem to motivate employees mostly through rewards and active management by exception [Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999]. Transformational leadership on the other end of the continuum is more charismatic leaning toward being inspirational in nature and intellectually stimulating [Bass, 1985].

Through my own experience working with both transformational and transactional leaders they are visible at all levels of an organization. Vera and Crossan [2004] state that at certain times organizational learning processes thrive under transactional leadership, and at other times they benefit more from transformational leadership. Where this seems to differ is when we discuss a model of strategic leadership which seems to pertain primarily to those leaders at the top of the organization as they have a very different and broader view of the organization and its stakeholders in addition to the larger environment beyond the organization undertaking these efforts. This is not to say that strategic leaders are necessarily either transformational or transactional. The same ambidextrous needs apply and indeed may be more important at this level of the organization particularly when moving towards a learning organization concept of “right time, right place.” The strategic leader is the person who will help to implement a learning culture at the organizational level. Studies have shown this can be accomplished through a transactional and/or transformational approach. The transactional approach would lean more towards a current culture following existing norms, rules and processes. Whereas the transformational approach would most likely align towards a new or different vision and be more open and flexible when moving the organization towards learning as an entity.

Although both transformational leadership and transactional leadership have been explored, researched and written about quite a bit in the literature, there appear to be more studies that lean toward a transformational approach to leading when discussing organizational learning. Hsiao and Chang [2011] state that Leadership is an important factor affecting organizational innovation. They go on to further state that many studies show that transformational leadership has a positive and significant influence on organizational innovation. In addition, their research has found sound evidence that transformational leadership and organizational learning have significant positive relationship influence on organizational innovation.

Organizational innovation is often linked with organizational learning in that organizational learning is a methodology that helps to produce an environment conducive to innovation. Bass

& Avolio's [1994] classification of skills necessary for transformational leaders known as the “Four I's” includes Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Again, we see a focus on transformational leadership, and this seems to be particularly true as it relates to the formulation and implementation of organizational learning.

Tichy & Devanna [1986] have identified characteristics of transformational leaders through their research: Qualities of a Change Agent such as adaptability, entrepreneurial and flexible; Courage, having the ability to take risks to move an organization beyond the status-quo; Openness and faith in followers providing confidence in those under them in the organizational structure; Led by values which are in congruence with what they and the organization have explicitly expressed; Life-long learning, not only in or for others, but for themselves as well; Ability to face complex, uncertain and ambiguous situations which inevitably arise throughout the course of their tenure as the leader; and, Visionary abilities which go hand-in-hand with the top job, but also means that they can readily identify the future state and communicate this with others in the organization in a way that moves the organization forward in a positive direction. Again, this is not to say that both transformational and transactional leadership are not necessary, indeed both skills are required to be that strategic leader most organizations seek to have. It does seem to point however that studies and the literature lean toward leaders who are highly skilled at the transformational leadership qualities instilling trust from followers.

In addition to these findings and research cited above, Amy [2007, p. 227] discusses the notion that leaders must be good facilitators of both individual and organizational learning. She goes on to say that such “leaders display emotional intelligence in communicating and relating as they perceive followers needs, establish emotional connections, customize their responses, and reinforce learning through motivating incentives and rewards.” In addition, an open, and trusting environment is necessary as the foundation for organizational learning to occur, and this makes emotional intelligence a key aspect of leading.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS:

Organizational learning efforts have been undertaken quite often and through many means and methodologies. As expected, some have met with tremendous success, and others have failed to produce the anticipated outcomes, relating to cultural changes and more concrete outcomes of innovation, process changes, new practices or new products/services. Despite some of these setbacks, leaders and organizations continue to work towards successes, and various research studies and actual implementation efforts have identified various aspects that can help lead to successful implementation of organizational learning efforts.

One of the researched factors regarding successful organizational learning efforts has to do with learning from successes or failures, and which of these contributes more to learning at the organizational level. Madsen and Desai [2010] pose through their research that organiza-

tions learn more effectively from large failures than from small failures. In addition, they go on to state that organizational learning occurs more effectively through observation of others' failures than through successes. One of the examples they use to confirm their hypothesis is that of NASA and the unfortunate disaster that took place in 2003 of the Columbia reentry where foam insulation had broken off during take-off, and as a result the break-up of the Columbia ship. As a result of this devastating accident, there was an immediate action and follow-up installing the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB), which was an intense and detailed review of the accident and its cause(s). The authors contrasted that accident to a minimal investigation that took place earlier in 2002 with the launch of the Atlantis which also lost foam insulation, but the rocket landed safely. In this case there was not a large undertaking to find the cause of the defect, and in fact the study had not even been completed upon the launch of the Columbia. Thus, the catastrophe of Columbia produced immense organizational learning whereas the perceived minor failure of Atlantis was basically a non-learning organizational response. Muehlfeld, Sahib, and Van Witteloostuijn [2008] observed through their research that context-specific learning patterns seem to point towards having facilitators of learning. They stress the crucial role of "deliberate learning," and suggest that documentation, discussion forums, and putting in place very specific institutional structures to deal with learning efforts highly contribute to the organizational learning. Another way of saying this is that a strategy regarding organizational learning efforts must be put into place that has very concrete elements in place allowing for knowledge to be documented and transferred throughout the organization as necessary. Thus, if the strategy is put in place, along with these concrete elements, it can provide long-lasting change in the organization. This should be related to both successes and failures that are important to the organization and its mission as well as vision for where it sees itself in the future.

The literature is clear that creating a learning environment is critical to organizational learning taking place. Lombardi [2007, p. 3] has identified eight critical factors that must be aligned to ensure a successful learning environment is created:

- Goals
- Content
- Instructional design
- Learner tasks
- Instructor roles
- Student/learner roles
- Technological affordances
- Assessment

The premise of the above leads to Authentic Learning which concretizes the organizational learning efforts. Although Lombardi's research and paper seem to lend itself more to structured learning settings, clearly these elements can cross over into organizations of all kinds. Lombardi goes on to list 10 design elements that are key to the authentic learning experience

and can lead to positive outcomes: Real-world relevance, real-world tasks that will make a difference in the anticipated outcomes; Ill-defined problems which relate to authentic activities open to multiple interpretations; Sustained investigation particularly related to complex problems that take time to think through and will require intellectual fortitude; Multiple sources and perspectives requiring the learners to examine a task or problem from multiple perspectives using a variety of sources; Collaboration which is what is required in most organizations and can provide differing perspectives; Reflection which is key to metacognition efforts requiring deep thinking; Interdisciplinary perspectives which extend beyond a particular discipline, and can often be key to how organizations learn across boundaries; Integrated assessments which in the real world requires a hard look at what has worked and has not worked allowing the individual, group and organization to learn from their learnings.

The concept of authentic learning as a necessary step to learning at an organizational level would almost certainly include the transfer of knowledge within the organization. This becomes particularly important when an organization is in transition, possibly driven by market forces, or when an aging workforce is being replaced due to retirements, geographical moves, rapid expansion or other instances for the need to share knowledge. Leonard and Swap [2004] discussed the concept of "Deep Smarts" whereas the best employees have the deepest knowledge of practices and concepts within an organization. One key to sustained organizational learning is the sharing of this deep knowledge and the comprehension of the knowledge to put it into practical use. Leonard and Swap [2004, p. 1] state that those individuals with "deep smarts" have the knowledge, both explicit and tacit knowledge stored from experiences, and the organization would be unable to advance if that knowledge were to disappear. Thus, the requirement to share the knowledge and have it transferred so as to maintain the knowledge and practices, but also to build on them.

Through our work with teams and organizations focusing on organizational learning we have seen numerous successes with relation to leaders becoming better listeners and trying to comprehend and better understand the input and learnings of those at lower levels of the organization. In addition, we have seen teams transfer their successful stories and knowledge of quality efforts [such as a team in Ford Motor Company] from one manufacturing plant to a host of other plants. This effort led to increased quality efforts at multiple locations throughout the United States and beyond, and increased morale as well as enhancing the trust between levels within the larger organization. In this way the "organization" as a whole was able to learn and build off of that learning to improve quality on a grander scale. We have also seen team learning improve based on strategy that incorporated concrete efforts at collecting and documenting learnings. The learnings were made up of trial-and-error attempts at new products and services, innovation attempts within practices and policies, and through reengineering efforts as well as process improvement efforts.

BARRIERS AND BOUNDARIES:

As with any attempt to change a practice, policy, or organizational approach to work there are numerous barriers. In the instance of organizational learning efforts that we undertook, we also ran into barriers, roadblocks and team/organizational boundaries that stood in the way of an organization advancing or learning. In one instance a Manager knowingly blocked progress by pulling a power play on a team, slamming his fist down on a table and yelling directly where the team sat totally demoralizing the team for good work accomplished, but different than what he thought it should be. In another instance there was a rift between management and the union which posed a huge roadblock to learning as neither side would compromise on issues large or small. Yet in another instance it was clear that a power struggle had emerged between two levels of management, whereas Engineering in a certain Automobile Company was unwilling to share power within a newly formed team-based environment. We have also experienced differences in culture getting in the way when working with Japanese Managers and American Managers, neither wanting to learn from the other, and stubbornly set in their own beliefs and practices.

One of the obstacles to leadership enhancing organizational learning was posed by Argyris [1986] with the concept of “skilled incompetence,” whereas managers and leaders become very competent at their own or their organizations level of incompetence. This may sound harsh, but we continue to see where routines become solidified within an organization as the way things are done and become competency traps.

As Levitt & March [1988, p. 322] surmised a “competency trap can occur when favorable performance with an inferior procedure leads an organization to accumulate more experience with it, thus keeping experience with a superior procedure inadequate to make it rewarding to use.” All too often managers and leaders become stuck in their thinking and in the previous practices that have been undertaken. This debilitating thinking is very dangerous for an organizations ability to move forward and make progress as a learning organization. When Argyris talks about the concept of skilled incompetence he is talking about literally designing errors into the system, which in reality are commonly accepted practices so much a part of the everyday work-life that those who use them take them for granted. This then leads to what he has identified as organizational defensive routines which are any policy, practice or action that prevents the people involved from being surprised, embarrassed or threatened, and at the same time prevents them from learning how to reduce the surprise, embarrassment or threat. Thus, the truth is discouraged because it can be threatening to others. This all leads to a very natural [human] way of avoiding embarrassment: Step 1 - Bypass the embarrassment and threat whenever possible. Step 2 - act as though you are not bypassing them. Step 3 - Don't discuss steps One and Two while they are happening, and Step 4 - don't discuss the undiscussability of the undiscussable. This then is “skilled incompetence” when Individual defensive routines become automatic and skillful. This does not only happen with Leaders or Individuals but can happen to groups and organizations.

Levitt and March [1988] discuss how even disagreements over the meaning of history are possible, and different groups develop alternative stories that interpret the same experience quite differently. At times different groups in an organization may have different targets or goals and evaluate the same outcome very differently based on their own goal or target, which does not, obviously lead to team or organizational learning, rather it stifles any learning on a grander scale. In addition to these barriers as noted above the literature also notes how bureaucracy is often the culprit in slowing down or denying an organization from learning.

Walker and Brewer [2008, p. 1123] have noted through a study they undertook that “previous research has apparently underestimated the extent of red tape [bureaucracy] in public organizations because such research has relied heavily on the perceptions of senior or upper-level officers who tend to perceive that red tape is less dense.” This coincides with Argyris findings that often senior leaders are the ones who do not fully comprehend that which keeps the organization from learning, and the “red tape” in this case becomes the undiscussable.

In Senge's [1990] work he talks about overcoming these barriers and distinguishes between more traditional organizations from those truly moving toward becoming a learning organization by mastering the five disciplines he described. He stated that “the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization” [p. 4]. His five disciplines are: Systems Thinking, A conceptual framework to make full patterns clearer; Personal Mastery, the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening one's own personal vision as well as seeing reality objectively; Mental Models, which are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or pictures/stories we hold in our heads that influence how we understand the world and thus move us to action. Very often we are unaware of these mental models as they can be in our unconscious, unlike paradigms which are more apparent to us; Building a shared vision, which are a set of principles and guiding practices that are shared amongst those in the organization. There must be congruence between one's own personal vision and that of the organization; and, Team Learning, which is the discipline of a team suspending assumptions, and entering into dialogue and truly thinking together, different from group think. In our experience, overcoming barriers to organizational learning are never easy, and the five disciplines that Senge has outlined are also not easy to undertake. In the past we have worked closely with the Society for Organizational Learning trying to put these five disciplines into practice within various organizations. We have found that the barriers to organizational learning are instilled within individuals and organizations, similar to Argyris' findings, and practicing the five disciplines continually can help overcome the barriers, but it must become a way of doing business, and the word “discipline” is the right word when describing these undertakings posed by Senge. One can understand the difficulty in undertaking the effort to become a learning organization as each of the 5 disciplines proposed by Senge must be practiced on a continual basis by everyone. Certainly, no easy undertaking!

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING:

Through research conducted [Mroz, 1996] many leaders understand that they may have the key role to play in moving an organization towards becoming a learning organization. One of the most consistent themes to come through interviews with top leaders was that modeling and providing examples of what one is desiring is critical for success related to learning. Another theme important to leading such efforts was that of establishing trust between the leader and those within the organization. And, critically important within the findings was allowing people to fail without punishment and also acknowledging successes. It was also key for leaders to not only talk from on high, but to actually “walk the talk” or another way it was expressed was to “lead by deeds.”

Much of the research on organizational learning and leadership is similar, but of course expands upon these findings. As noted earlier, Amy [2008] poses that emotional intelligence was given the most emphasis in the research as well as the prominent feature of being a facilitative leader. She also noted that leaders must challenge the status quo assumptions regarding environment and how things are currently being undertaken. She goes on to state [p. 227] that “An informal, approachable communication style creates an open, trusting environment in which leaders facilitate learning through asking questions, clarifying expectations, delegating learning projects, teaching based on their personal experience and example, and upholding standards that foster accountability.” It is critical for leaders to make connections and enforce learning from both a cognitive and emotional level which helps to enforce trust and enable learning at a larger scale. Hugo, Vlado and Miha [2009] note that the significance of organizational learning for performance and the role of the leader influencing the learning process in organizations now has become increasingly important. In the years since this research has taken place the world has become even more complex and organizations must find ways to instill learning practices and principles to not only stay afloat but to thrive and prosper. The competitive, global, political forces at play, as well as competitor’s innovations can severely impact organizations making it imperative that leaders focus on learning and help to instill these values throughout the organization.

Vargas [2015] is clear in stating that organizational learning and the appropriate leadership style has become a critical strategic advantage to achieving innovation, high performance and in being competitive. Resting on what was once good or even great is no longer acceptable, but rather the leader must be the influential factor in moving the organization to become a learning organization with a tone of unconditional learning for all employees/participants. Mai [2004] lent very pragmatic approaches that leaders must take when focusing on organizational learning and organizational renewal. He posed that leaders must entertain two related roles in their quest to instill learning in the organization, that of critic and provocateur as well as being a learning advocate and innovation coach. The role of critic and provocateur requires some very specific skill sets and operating practices. Casting a critical eye on what is being done and accomplished must be done in a manner that will not offend people and the culture

must be one of accepting the notion that things can change for the better. As we noted earlier, all too often the work becomes routine and change can be looked upon as negative or a nuisance versus a learning and continuous improvement. Mai goes on to provide some important elements related to being the critic such as how to pose potent questions and using confrontation to provoke a critical review. In addition, setting expectations for disagreement and debate is crucial so that everyone understands the rules and that it is okay to be challenged, and that certainly includes the leader.

Focusing on organizational learning by the leader seems to be a sound element within the research, and as noted above there are various approaches, ideas and techniques that can be utilized to instill learning throughout an organization. It has been made imminently clear throughout the literature that this is not easy and takes discipline and requires a constant focus on improvement. Pruitt [2017] provides seven practical things a leader must do to increase learning within their respective organization: 1. Intentionally have a learning plan and manage to the continuous learning necessary for knowledge gain; 2. Connect learning with the strategic organizational operations and initiatives which lead to proficiency of performance related to operational growth; 3. Develop a coalition of learning advocates/champions who can assist with the planning and help with the implementation of a learning strategy; 4. Provide learning opportunities for major changes within the organization, and possibly even smaller changes. Training & Educational efforts are often overlooked or seen as not necessary, on the contrary, Pruitt expresses how very important these can be for change and learning in the workplace; 5. Emphasize learning whenever possible in communications including the why and what’s in it for people and the organization; 6. Be a learning example, as has been stated in earlier notations as being a role model for learning and communication; 7. Ensure successful learning throughout the organization by providing the time, money and attention as well as administrative support that will prove how important it is to the organization that everyone continue to learn for the betterment and advancement of the organization.

Finally, the premise in this section is to elaborate on the importance the leader plays in promoting and undertaking organizational learning efforts. Atwood, Mora & Kaplan [2010, p. 578] unequivocally state the heart of “organizational learning is leaders creating more leaders,” thus promoting leadership throughout the entire organization. In systems thinking this can become a positive loop of learning that transcends the organization continuing to build upon itself, thus changing the culture of the organization into a true learning organization.

SUMMATION AND CONCLUSIONS:

Organizational learning is a broad field that extends far beyond one discipline and much of the research cited throughout this paper and in the organizational learning research puts leadership at the helm for driving learning. There may never be an all-encompassing framework or agreement upon one definition of organizational learning, but that does not suppose

that it is any less important in driving our organizations for constant improvement, innovation and striving for new goals, approaches and processes. Easterby-Smith [1997] posed that the creation of a comprehensive theory of organizational learning was unrealistic for three reasons. First, most of the literature regarding this topic can best be understood from a limited number of discipline perspectives with each discipline having its own dynamics and bounded by those dynamics. Let me note that this may no longer be exactly true as disciplines have learned that exploring beyond their own boundaries have provided previously unthought of knowledge that can be applied to numerous disciplines and functions beyond what they may have been initially focused on. Genetics for example crosses a number of disciplines including biology, chemistry and environmental science. Second, Easterby-Smith argues the difference between organizational learning which he stated is more analytical focusing on the study of learning versus the learning organization which is action and more outcome oriented. To this point, it is becoming a bit more focused in that one is dependent upon the other, and organizational learning strategies can lead to the creation of a learning organization through practice and culture change. Third, the existence and reality of the differing disciplines can lead to confusion throughout research efforts. Although this author can identify faults within each of these three reasons for the development of a comprehensive framework or definition of organizational learning, there is basic agreement that a common definition may elude scholars. Through transdisciplinary research and ultimate approaches and meanings the elusive framework may yet be achieved, and certainly new theories and models will be discovered transcending various disciplines.

As it relates to leaders leading organizational efforts Mroz [1996] found that leaders can undertake the following practices to enhance organizational learning: 1. Strive for common processes where possible. This is somewhat controversial, but where possible it can prevent confusion, errors and chaos within and across an organization; 2. Create teams and cross-functional learning which can promote learning within smaller groups and then extending and expanding the learning beyond those teams to the larger organization; 3. At every opportunity share knowledge, information and learnings. Instilling this practice throughout the organization ultimately changes the culture and sharing becomes the norm; 4. Involve people within the organization in many different manners including changing teams, including them when possible in decision making and problem solving. Not only does this help to create increased involvement, but it instills pride and also creates more opportunities for learning across the organization while creating buy-in to many of these practices; 5. Practice instilling deep conversations and dialogue as ways of communicating and enhancing understanding of various positions. These deeper conversations also take place at the emotional and psychological levels not only at the cognitive levels, thus bringing the whole person into the conversations and expanding the capacity to create new information and knowledge; 6. Help people learn how to learn by paying attention to our learning. This can be done partially by structuring learning environments and opportunities and may entail learning new skills; 7. Strongly encourage truth-telling, honesty, trust, and openness. This is particularly important

between and amongst differing levels within an organization, where too often truth-telling up the organization is discouraged for fears that are found out through the culture of the organization and past experiences.

Throughout the research relating to leadership and organizational learning it is prevalent that leadership (both informal and formal leadership) have a key role in moving an organization towards organizational learning. This is in no way to say that organizational learning can only take place by being driven from the top of the organization. Rather, the importance of the leader's role is clear, and if the larger organization is to move in this direction than it seems imperative that the senior leader undertake the role of champion of this effort. While leaders at all levels will ultimately need to champion organizational learning, only the senior leader, the strategic leader of the organization can provide some of the insights, and vision for a good rationale to move in this direction, thus inspiring people at all levels of the organization. Once this has been started, it takes discipline, and clearly defined strategies for learning to be encompassed within the organizational structures. There are no easy answers or silver bullets to become a learning organization, rather it takes focus, discipline and everyone practicing the elements of organizational learning which can move an organization in the direction necessary to achieve profound learning at a higher and deeper level. Based on the research above it would also appear that if leadership practices transformational leadership approaches organizational learning may be more deeply instilled in the organization with a better chance of lasting positive change.

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