

Summary:

- Creating structures and habits that support *generative learning* are important in becoming a learning organization and critical to sustainable change efforts.
- Becoming a learning organization requires intentionality.
- One of the most important outcomes of being a learning organization is supporting and growing internal responsibility across the institution.

What is a Learning Organization?

Learning is part of all human activity. In our field, we often think about the individual learning that happens in our spaces and programs, but we can also think about learning at an organizational level. Learning is a critical component of organizational change efforts—especially DEAI efforts, which require us to reconsider long-held values, beliefs, and ways of working.

Senge defines a learning organization as one that is continually expanding its capacity to reflect in order to intentionally create its future—a future in which new ideas and expansive ways of thinking are nurtured and harnessed. While all individuals and teams have the capacity to learn, organizational environments are not always conducive to helping them do so. One of the main characteristics, then, of a learning organization is one that creates a culture and environment (e.g., structures, supports, beliefs, attitudes) for learning and visioning what could be. Furthermore, learning organizations go beyond “adaptive learning,” which is typically focused on survival and, while needed, must be joined with “generative learning.”

Generative learning emphasizes ongoing experimentation and feedback as well as examining the ways in which an organization defines and solves challenges. At its core, generative learning requires organizations to question their assumptions and practices.

“Double Loop” Learning

Argyris and Schön, who developed the concept of “single-” and “double-loop” learning, have deeply influenced much of the thinking on learning organizations.

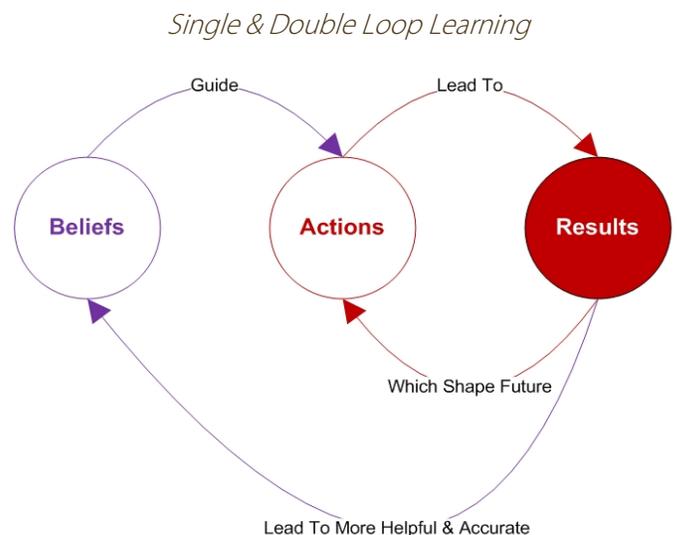


Image: Deborah Kendall

In single-loop learning, when something goes wrong or does not turn out as expected, people

Generative Learning

may course-correct or try another strategy to address the problem, but do so without changing their basic assumptions—that is, the underlying values, goals, and plans are not questioned because people often act out of habit and expect these actions to produce the intended results.

In double-loop learning, on the other hand, an issue is addressed in ways that involve closely examining and questioning an organization's underlying norms, objectives, and actions. Double-loop learning is a type of generative learning. One key to double-loop learning is reflective practice, whereby organizations not only examine their own behaviors and take responsibility for their actions (or lack of actions), but also question underlying values and assumptions that may not have been previously acknowledged.

Individuals and organizations must become aware of their mental models (i.e., the assumptions and views that influence how one understands the world and takes action) in order to move beyond them and cultivate openness to differing perspectives or new ideas. Senge emphasizes that organizations need to foster such openness.

Kuabara and Takahashi argue that the depth of an organization's learning process directly affects its diversity and inclusion efforts, noting that those who engage only in single-loop learning involve merely "ceremonial" (or superficial) practices toward diversity that give the appearance of addressing the issue, but actually do not; their actions are disconnected from a deeper examination of the very structures, policies, and assumptions that are at the heart of diversity and inclusion. Thus, DEAI efforts and ongoing

practices are best supported through double-loop learning.

At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.

Senge

Qualities of a Learning Organization

Organizations do not organically "become" learning organizations; it must be an intentional process. One of the most important outcomes of becoming a learning organization is the growth of internal responsibility across the organization for supporting change. The full involvement of all individuals across the organization in a collaborative process and collective accountability is critical.

Among the qualities necessary for learning organizations are: flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to adopt a learning attitude open to new ideas; fostering a supportive environment where people are not afraid to ask questions and take risks; learning to value competing or opposing perspectives; and making time for reflection. Learning organizations are also characterized by a high degree of collaboration and trust.

Learning organizations also have the ability to:

- Promote inquiry and dialogue: The culture supports questioning, feedback, and experimentation.
- Encourage team learning and collaboration: The organization values and rewards teams learning and acting together. Different perspectives and ways of thinking are valued.
- Capture and share learning: Systems are developed to share learning, integrated into the work, and accessible to all members.
- Work toward a collective vision: People are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision and share in the responsibility, decision-making, and accountability.
- Connect the organization to its community: The organization is linked to its community(ies) and the organization draws on and uses information from the community to inform its work.

Reflections

- What capacities does your organization already possess toward becoming a learning organization?
- What are the gaps?
- How can you leverage existing capacities and/or address existing gaps through your CCLI strategic initiative?

Select References

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Kuabara, P. S. S. & Takahashi, A. R. W. (2017). Organizational learning, practices of diversity, and ceremonialism: a study proposal in the multinationals context. *Revista de Administração Mackenzie*, 18(5), 169-201.

Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (2003). Demonstrating the Value of an Organization's Learning Culture: The Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(2), 132–151.

Shin, H., Picken, J., & Dess, G. (2017). Revisiting the learning organization. *Organizational Dynamics*, 46(1), 46-56.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.