

Chapter 12

Towards a Learning Organization: Navigating Barriers, Levers, and Employees' Capacity for Change

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ABSTRACT

A learning organization is one that is consistently capable of adaptive change in response to signals from its environment. However, knowledge management initiatives to enact learning organizations have not been uniformly successful. This chapter focuses on the role of the psychological environment of the individual in enabling or hampering organizational learning. Six theories drawn from multiple fields are reviewed to identify both opportunities and barriers to fostering change at the level of the individual. These include orientation to learning, motivation to act, and capacity for change. However, the authors argue that organizations ought to be regarded as complex social systems. Change strategies intended to foster a learning organization are more likely to succeed if they embrace the idea that designing change for complex social systems requires a special approach: design thinking. This is characterized by iterative prototyping, experimenting, trialing, and piloting changes to work processes, structures, and tasks.

INTRODUCTION

More than two decades ago, a global wave of digital infrastructure investment began, primarily to avoid Y2K calamity. This same wave also ushered in new capabilities for information use that are now taken for granted, such as being able to search for information across an entire enterprise. With these new capabilities came a general expectation that organizations would inevitably become “smarter,” simply as a consequence of this investment. There are many stories in the literature of knowledge management

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7422-5.ch012

triumphs: specific initiatives, projects, and technologies successfully used to promote knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, expertise location, knowledge mobilization, knowledge translation, improved decision-making, and the list goes on. However, successful examples of such change seem to be a hit-and-miss affair: the burgeoning field of knowledge management has not established consistent success. This is not for a lack of effort by both theorists and practitioners in search of a reliable path to better outcomes. Terms such as “change management,” “knowledge assets,” and “employee empowerment” have entered the 21st century knowledge-economy lexicon. What appears to be largely absent from this discourse, however, is a consideration of whether there are foundational, systematic barriers to effective knowledge use, such as a failure to recognize the needs of individual employees, for effective organizational learning to occur.

This chapter uses the lens of *organizational learning* as a holistic construct to describe the potential of an organization to make maximum effective use of its information and knowledge assets. The focus of this chapter is the corollary to that statement: barriers to organizational learning may help explain instances when knowledge management initiatives have not succeeded. The target of analysis here is not the organization, but the *individual*, operating within the socially constructed environment provided by an organization. It is argued here that more attention to the psychological environment of individuals may help knowledge management projects to succeed. However, a focus on the individual is complicated terrain: broad paradigms such as “employee empowerment” may be naïve if they fail to anticipate, much less mitigate, significant obstacles to the cognitive and behavioural capacities and limits of individuals to engage in work changes driven by organizational learning.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning can be broadly defined as the ability of an organization to respond effectively to changes in its internal and external environments. This includes making sense of new information, deriving useful insights, making decisions, and changing behaviour accordingly. By analogy, *individuals* learn by making sense of experiences they have and information they encounter, using these to grow knowledge and inform action to enact change; organizations adept at learning do the same.

However, as organizations are collectivities of individuals, the learning process is necessarily more complex than that of an individual. Most organizations are capable of some adaptation to change, but not necessarily to the extent of smoothly managing several kinds of ongoing change derived from organizational learning. The scope of change can include the content of work itself, organizational structures, work practices, policies, and resource allocation. An organization that is consistently adept at responding to change can be called a *Learning Organization*.

Many scholars and authors have grappled with the challenges associated with establishing and sustaining a culture of creating, retaining, transferring and utilizing knowledge effectively within an organization. While organizational learning has been explored a great deal at the level of organizational culture and group behaviour, less attention has been devoted to the psychological level of the individual. This chapter addresses this oversight.

Structure of this Chapter

This chapter is organized into two parts. Part 1 introduces six theories from five different fields to explore why an organization’s ability to use information and knowledge effectively to learn and adapt often seems

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