

## Chapter 24. Steps Towards the Learning Organization

### Introduction

After Peter Senge's immensely successful book on organization learning came out (Senge, 1990), I was not sure if I had anything to add to the discussion. However, it was soon evident it wasn't easy to create learning organizations, and that there were, as in anything that promises to transform organizations for the better, some dark sides to be explored. Who better, I asked, than myself, "Squire of the Dark Side," to explore these matters? I was then working with Charlie Kiefer, Peter's early collaborator, in Innovation Associates, and Peter's book was bringing in a lot of business to the firm. Out of the issues and dilemmas posed by this work, I crafted an internal working paper for my colleagues, and expanded it in successive revisions into a monograph too long for inclusion here, *Towards the Learning Organization* (Harrison, 1992). The present paper includes some parts of that longer work. It was originally published as a contribution to a book on organization futures (Harrison, 1994\*). In it I share my vision of the "look and feel" of a "learning organization." I make a case for distinguishing between "high order learning" and "ordinary learning." I enumerate the criteria which I use to identify and promote high order learning. (I reserve the term, "learning organization," for one that does a lot of high order learning.)

I identify barriers to learning that are endemic in organizations, notably fear, and a bias for unreflective action. I show how problem solving activities that are not soundly based on deep reflection into basic causes create ever more problems in a vicious circle. I also identify how some current changes that are going on in many if not most organizations create a need for healing the trauma and stress that block high order learning.

A major section of this paper is devoted to describing the approach to learning oriented consulting that I have evolved over the past few years. I call it a "learning frame for consulting." In that section I bring together my work on self directed learning with my recent experiences as a consultant. In both of those domains of my professional life, I seek to empower clients to take over many, if not most of the tasks of educator and consultant. I present my thoughts on these matters in the form of a presentation that I might make to a prospective client group on how I would (and would not) work with them.

The thrust of this paper is to make the point that the "learning organization," like "culture change," is no panacea. To clear away the barriers that make high order learning difficult in most organizations requires deep commitment and ongoing dialogue among all the stakeholders who are to be part of the learning process. Improving learning, like improving service, is mostly a matter of removing barriers so people can follow their natural bent for learning and serving.

It would be equally appropriate to put this paper in the section on Organization Development. I have placed it here, because it nicely brings my work as educator *and* consultant up to the present, here at the end of this book.

## **Steps Towards the Learning Organization**

**(with Graham Dawes)**

### **Introduction**

As an organization development consultant, I have always concerned myself with people learning new ways of working and relating together. However, in my practice and in that of others, the focus on learning has often been unclear. Sometimes the priority is not so much on learning as it is on fixing immediate problems. There is also confusion between different kinds

of learning processes. Training, trial and error learning, planned experimentation, work redesign and strategic planning may all be learning processes, but not all of them build the capacity of individuals to learn, nor do most of them build the systems of cooperation and the shared commitment to learning which foster organization members learning together on a continuing basis.

Although it is often unclear exactly what people mean when they talk about “the learning organization,” Here is my attempt to define its qualities. I believe many of the elements below are present in most of the minds now pondering the question, “How do we make organizations into learning systems?”

#### **At the Individual Level:**

- Individuals innovate and initiate. They believe that their success in doing so will be rewarded, and that failure will be treated as a step in the learning process.
- Individuals develop good learning habits. They ask many questions; they carry out experiments to test their ideas; they freely and openly pool information on what is working, and what is not.
- People’s thirst for data and first hand experience exceed their deference to the opinions of persons in authority.

At the level of organization culture

- The organization is much more egalitarian than most. It treats people as valued contributors. It nurtures and rewards their creativity and initiative.
- People in authority support, expedite and facilitate the contributions of those who report to them, and bring a broader organizational perspective to the work of their

units. They expect subordinates to be internally motivated and responsive to the needs of their peers, rather than motivated by rewards and punishments from above.

- People are expected to try things that don't work the first time, *and* they are expected to learn from their mistakes.
- There is high receptivity to communication up, down and sideways in the organization. There is an absence of territoriality and "not invented here." It is easy to find a receptive ear for one's ideas.
- Individuals are empowered to contribute in accordance with their ability *and* their developmental needs, rather than their position in the organization. Ideas are judged on their merits, rather than according to the role or status of the person who puts them forward.
- The norms and values of the organization support cooperation and mutual support. People help one another beyond the formal demands of their jobs. People are valued for sharing their knowledge, expertise and talents, rather than devoting them exclusively to individual achievement.
- People celebrate one another's achievements and grieve their losses together. There is a sense of camaraderie, community and caring.

Readers who are familiar with my work on organization cultures and their associated levels of consciousness (Harrison, 1972, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992; Harrison and Stokes, 1992) will recognize above the qualities and characteristics of the cultures I have labeled Achievement and Support, or, in my later work, Self-Expression and Mutuality. Such organization cultures tend to support cooperation, initiative and personal risk-taking. Traditional organizations with

strong Power- and Role-oriented (Transactional) cultures tend to block the learning of people at lower levels of the pyramid by relying heavily on rewards and fear to drive performance, and by rigid structures, rules and procedures which block communications and stifle initiative and intergroup cooperation.

### **At the Level of the Whole System**

- People whose roles place them at the edges of the organization are valued for the intelligence they bring about the environment: technological developments, markets, customers, government, and the public. Since everyone in the organization also lives in the environment part of the time, everyone is encouraged to bring in such information. Systems for sorting and distributing environmental information to people who can use it are well developed.

- Everyone is assumed to have a “need to know.” A great deal of effort, time and technology goes into developing the “organizational hologram,” in which each part understands, appreciates and honors its interdependence with the other parts, and with the whole.

- The organization develops and uses *participative technologies* for
  - 1) giving everyone in the organization an understanding and appreciation of the ongoing state of the organization’s internal and external functioning and performance, and of the environmental demands and opportunities that it faces.

- 2) enabling everyone to contribute to the quality of the organization’s strategic thinking and planning.

- The working map of the organization looks like a network, rather than a pyramid. It displays task and information interdependencies, as well as responsibility and accountability structures.

- Much attention is given to mapping the “nodes” or “ganglia” of the network, those points where all those with significant impact on the success of a task, project or function come together. The organization develops systems and processes to facilitate mutual learning at these nodes.
- The organization invests heavily in learning. Its time horizon is longer than most, and its strategists are willing when necessary to forgo short term results in favor of longer term positioning.
- Members of the organization have a sense of its purpose and contribution, above and beyond the making of profits. The shared sense of a greater value and meaning to the organization’s existence justifies and supports a balance between short and long term thinking, and between human and economic values.

It is fortunate that an organization need not possess all these qualities and characteristics in order to manifest better than ordinary levels of learning. Many of the qualities and conditions listed above are rare in today’s organizations. However, enough of them are within the reach of organizations I work with to give me confidence that persistence in this developmental effort will bring rewards.

### **We Must Transform Our Ability to Learn**

My confidence stems from my reading of current and future necessity. We all, as individuals and organizations, must *learn how to learn* both continuously and well. The current competitive and exploitative paradigm is rapidly destroying the ability of the planet to support our living—we must transform our ways of thinking, learning, and understanding to higher levels of consciousness that will lead us into harmony with one another and with our greater

environment. Individually, organizationally, and as a species our situation is precarious. The things we are doing to cope with our problems are doing about as much harm as good. To thrive, and even to survive, our learning must go beyond how to do things faster and better within our current frames and concepts—we must learn how to transform ourselves, our organizations, and our institutions.

Perhaps only disaster of a cataclysmic nature will provide enough of a shock to our systems of thought to stimulate the necessary evolution. But the seeds of new thought are forever sown on the edges of the ordinary and the known. I believe that investment in nurturing these seeds of new ways of learning will provide us with patterns for survival in future cataclysmic transitions, *and* will pay more mundane dividends in the medium term. Only this belief allows me in good conscience to take on projects for leaders and managers who, no matter how idealistic they are in private, must produce positive results in their imperfect organizations within a reasonable time.

### **High Order Learning**

To cope with current and future changes, organizations must elevate their learning processes to a higher order. The learning processes in traditional organizations form the contrasting pole, which I do not think of as “low order learning,” but more as “ordinary learning” — activities and processes that we typically find in what I have called Power- and Role-oriented organizations.

These activities include training and other learning processes of which the purpose is to transfer to employees knowledge and skills the organization possesses which the employee needs to know and be able to do. They include trial and error learning and “learning by doing.” They

include problem solving approaches that attempt to isolate problems and deal with them in isolation from their context and their systemic connections with other parts of the organization or the environment. They include the informal and only partly conscious processes by which we learn the culture of the organization: whom we have to pay attention to, and whom we can safely ignore; what rules are to be obeyed, and which are to be broken with impunity; what the differences are between the espoused values and the values-in-action; what actions and attitudes lead to reward and recognition, and which lead to less pleasant consequences.

Of course, these “ordinary learning processes” also occur organizations that manifest “high order learning.” For the most part, high order learning is “something more,” rather than “instead of.” However, ordinary learning processes often act as blocks and barriers to high order learning. Then we must change our ways if we are to liberate the higher order processes.

Here are some criteria for high order learning which will help structure what may otherwise be a rather fuzzy term.

***High order learning requires constant attention to the learning process.*** Learning is one of the values of the organization’s culture. There is a learning as well as a doing component to all of the organization’s activities. Taking action includes examining the consequences and results of action, so there *is no action without learning*.

***High order learning is wider and longer in its conceptual scope.*** We go beyond the search for immediate causes of symptoms and quick fixes to an attempt to understand the entire system and its relationships with its environment, and how those evolve over time. This means that when we address a problem, we will normally formulate it in more complex terms than those in which we originally stated it, in order to understand how it is embedded within the larger system and



connected to the system's environment. We will often then discover that the causes are distant in time and place from the effects and symptoms we wish to change.

***High order learning is self-initiated and self-directed.*** Organization members take responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on authorities and professionals to provide training and development opportunities.

***High order learning is global rather than local in its use of systemic thinking, its focus on the complexity of relationships, and its preoccupation with wholes rather than parts.*** As the scope of inquiry widens beyond the local, we discover that the solution to a problem in one part of a system usually creates problems for other parts of the system. Thus, high order learning activities are likely to turn the problems that we thought required solutions into dilemmas requiring choice among imperfect alternatives. At the point of decision, we base our actions upon an understanding of the mixed positive and negative consequences that are likely to result.

***High order learning involves articulating and questioning basic assumptions and mental models of reality, rather than limiting inquiry to issues within the current paradigm.*** High order learning includes, though it is not limited to what has elsewhere been called "second order learning." It involves questioning the organization's values and norms, particularly those which limit learning through systematically ignoring certain issues, behaviors and patterns, or defining them as undiscussable.

I call this aspect of an organization's culture the *shadow*, because there are powerful influences on behavior that are unseen and unacknowledged. The influences are not necessarily negative, but they operate outside of our awareness. Bringing the shadow into the light can liberate the creativity and energy of the organization, because it increases *choice* dramatically.

*High order learning involves the creation of learning systems, sometimes called*

*“organizational learning” as well as individual learning.* The organization, operating as an organic learning system, becomes better able to take in and comprehend complex information from the environment and to modify its behavior on the basis of that information. Unless the organization is well developed as a learning system, it will frustrate the attempts of individual members to put their learning into practice, and their knowledge and wisdom will not be fully utilized.

### **Barriers Against Learning in Organizations**

There are formidable barriers to the improvement of learning in organizations. Two of the most important barriers are:

- The inhibition of learning by the presence of fear, anxiety, and other strong negative emotions in the organization.
- The bias for action that is embedded in the character of most leaders and managers, and the culture of their organizations.

I shall take up each in turn. I do not have a sure cure to offer for any of them; they are part of the fabric of organizational life. We must take such barriers into account if we hope to create organizations as learning systems, but before leaping to 'solutions' we first must be clear about the nature of these and other barriers.

### ***Fear Inhibits Learning in Organizations***

We know from psychology that a modest level of emotional arousal (anger, fear, excitement) promotes attention and appears to facilitate learning; at higher levels learning falls off rapidly. What my colleagues and I increasingly see in North America and Europe is

organizations in which people are struggling to learn and adapt to ever higher rates of change while they labor under heavy burdens of fear, resentment and anxiety.

### ***Differences Between Fear and Anxiety***

In this discussion it is important to distinguish between fear and anxiety (*angst*) in organizations. When I first began my consulting practice, I could see a fair amount of fear in organizations. People were often afraid of the authority of the boss. Those who had experienced the hardships of the Great Depression were afraid of being without work again. Many people feared to express their personal views of organizational reality, because they feared being “out of step,” or being seen as an “oddball.” These fears were fairly specific and could be articulated clearly, once trust was established with the person.

It is different now. While specific fears of authority, peer rejection, or losing one’s job are still active, there are many organizations in which people are considerably empowered and autonomous, compared to 20 or 30 years ago. Even in those organizations, however, there seems to be a darker cloud of anxiety that is felt by many if not most people in the organization. It is often very subtle, and most of the time it is nonspecific.

Anxiety doesn’t have an *object* in the way that fear does, and it is often difficult to articulate. It is best known by its effects. These include a general sense of uneasiness or malaise; a tendency to be either scattered or extremely narrow in one’s focus; a heightened tendency to engage in addictive behaviors such as substance abuse or workaholism; an inability to concentrate or to reflect deeply about organizational issues; and a preference for short term thinking.

### ***The Prevalence of Fear in Organizations***

Fear has always been present in organizations, and perhaps is no more prevalent than in the past. In fact, the trend towards empowerment in many organizations has diminished it substantially. While fear may be decreasing somewhat, the increase in anxiety appears more general. Increasingly, my colleagues report such patterns are prevalent in the organizations they serve. The patterns are seen in highly successful organizations on a steep growth curve, as well as organizations that are struggling to cope with competition. The difference seems to be that in organizations that are doing poorly, there are more specific fears and anger around the possibility of job loss, while in successful organizations people experience more free-floating anxiety.

In addition to the waves of downsizing caused by a general restructuring and flattening of business organizations, along with hard times and technological displacement, people in general also feel economically insecure. There is a growing sense that our planet cannot sustain the high levels of affluence to which we in the developed nations have become accustomed. While people are not quite ready to believe that the disasters that have befallen the former communist countries will inevitably happen here, we are increasingly aware of complex economic interdependencies that make us ever more vulnerable to one another's troubles.

There is thus a sense of unease and impending doom that hangs over us all, and that is not so much a fear of something specific, but the anxiety associated with massive uncertainty about what are the causes of our difficulties, what the future holds, and what, if anything, we can do to influence the future in a positive way.

Sources of anger and resentment

Anger and resentment are also on the rise, as our largest organizations dismantle the implicit contract that has for so long governed the relationship in bureaucracies between the organization and its managerial and white collar employees. People are increasingly being required to change and to learn new ways of thinking, new attitudes, and new behaviors, as a condition for retaining their employment. The choice is ever more frequently between learning and growing, and being demoted or unemployed. Even when we are not actively facing such a choice, we know others who are.

What is communicated to organization members is that after years of satisfactory service, they are suddenly not good enough, and may be dispensed with if they don't get their act together. In many organizations this results in a cloud of negative emotionality that hangs over the daily working lives of their members. People in such organizations once felt they had good reason to believe that if they followed the rules and performed adequately, they could count on a job for life, and a good retirement. Ancient understandings in which security was given by large bureaucratic organizations in exchange for loyalty and conformity on the part of employees has given way to an attitude of aggressive self-interest on both sides of the employment contract. That implicit contract has been terminated in most organizations in the US and the UK, and there is much anxiety, anger and resentment as a result.

Faced with relentless and repeated reductions in the workforce, many of those who are working today do not know if they will be tomorrow. They feel powerless to protect themselves against impending loss, and they are bitterly resentful toward organizations that increasingly treat them as commodities to be used when convenient, and then discharged into the social environment as human waste products of the production process.

## **Betrayal in Organizations**

Much of the anger and resentment that I see in organizations is associated with *betrayal*. One form of betrayal occurs when the more powerful party to an agreement or understanding fails to keep the faith, and unilaterally terminates the understanding. Our anger at such a betrayal is not limited to the cause at hand; it is fueled by the many times in the past we have been let down or led astray by someone we trusted on whom we were dependent: parents, older friends and siblings, teachers, lovers.

It is a truism that many if not most organizations are engaged in *transformation*, by which I mean changes in fundamental ways of perceiving, understanding and valuing the world about us (sometimes called a “paradigm shift”). Transformations can occur spontaneously, but they are usually set in motion by painful disconfirmation: we find that things are not what they seem, and that they don’t work the way they are supposed to. Most transformations involve betrayal, in the sense that they involve the unilateral termination of explicit or implicit contracts between the organization and its members.

Betrayal often occurs around reductions in the size of organizations through terminating the employment of people who had reason to believe their jobs were secure, so long as they did what they were told and followed the rules. Typically, the pattern involves repeated layoffs; sometimes the sense of betrayal is sharpened by assurances from management that each layoff is the last. Another frequent betrayal involves changes in job content or title, such that the affected individual loses some aspect of status or identity that the individual feels he or she has earned and has a right to.

The process of change and improvement also contains in it the likelihood of betrayal. People are frequently asked to trust, to risk, and to take initiatives. They are asked to give from a deeper place, going beyond the transactional contracts typical of Power and Role organizations. Instead of simply working for mundane rewards, people are induced to work from purpose and commitment. They are, in effect, invited to work for love, and what is promised is nothing less than a new order in which dignity, respect, mutual support, and camaraderie take the place of selfishness, exploitation and alienation.

When change initiatives lack substance and long term commitment on the part of leaders, they amount to a seduction of the innocent. Those who “sign on” and “buy in” are those who believe and who trust. When leaders fail to hold the course and deliver the dreams they have created, the sense of betrayal is actually greater than when people lose their jobs through the “normal” operation of markets, technology and the business cycle.

This is not to point a blaming finger at leaders, who are subject to the same human frailties as the rest of us. It is only to point to a process that is very costly for organization transformation. We do not readily trust leaders, here in North America. When we are induced to overcome our mistrust and give of our deeper selves, any betrayal of our trust builds in deep cynicism, that makes it all that much less likely that future enlightened initiatives can be given credibility. I believe the major reason why it is easier to generate high trust and internally motivated performance in new organizations than it is in older ones is the legacy of old betrayals that exists in most organizations that have any history at all.

### **Leaders' Underestimation of the Effects of Negative Emotions**

The effects of strong negative emotions are consistently underestimated by leaders. People suppress their negativity in interactions with power figures. They are unwilling to be seen as weak, disloyal, or under motivated, and they may fear the consequences of exposing themselves as such. Thus, in the first place, the expression of negative feelings is self-censored. Fear, anxiety and anger become undiscussable in organizations.

It is sometimes acceptable to talk openly about others' fear, almost never about one's own. Anger and resentment are a little easier to address, but not much. When strong emotions do surface, the process is seldom experienced as constructive, and thus people's reluctance to deal with them openly is confirmed.

Leaders for their part mostly do not want to hear about people's negative feelings. To know that one's subordinates are angry and resentful increases one's own anxiety. To know that they are anxious and fearful leaves many leaders and managers feeling helpless. Most managers are men, and men are frequently ill at ease in dealing with their own distress or that of others. It is difficult for leaders to listen to and acknowledge the existence of emotional problems when they feel ill-equipped to deal with them effectively. They feel responsible in part for the well-being of subordinates, and they do not know how to help. So for a variety of reasons, managers and leaders subtly or overtly discourage the expression of negative emotions,

Because they are out of touch with the pain in their organizations, leaders often seek to implement programs (quality initiatives, reorganizations, service improvement programs, etc.) that require heavy investments in learning, directly following traumatic organizational events such as major downsizing. In part, they do this because they are themselves under heavy pressure to improve organizational performance, and they are passing that pressure along in the



time-honored way of hierarchical organizations. In part, they really do not know how traumatized and stressed the members of the organization are, and when they are aware, they do not know how to heal the wounds.

Learning under such conditions is difficult, and it is usually of a low order. People do what they are told, but they do not take risks and initiatives, do not experiment, and are reluctant to participate. If we wish to approach the transformation of our organizations into high order learning systems, or if we just want the organization to be a place that supports the learning and growth of individuals and groups, then we must find ways of healing distress and trauma, if only to ameliorate their effects on learning.

### **Action as Avoidance of Learning**

Organization members often say that they are too heavily loaded with urgent tasks to engage in deep investigation and reflection on the causes of problems. This statement is supported by the amount of time people are putting in on the job. Most of my clients are working harder than at any time in my many years as a consultant; their time is filled not only with managing operations, but also with endless meetings concerned with change and solving problems.

Most of my clients see themselves as decisive and action-oriented. They say they want the facts required to make a decision and get on with the work of implementing it, and I believe them. I also observe, and they confirm, that in meetings they often fail to arrive at decisions, because needed information is unobtainable, or the right course of action is not clear, or there are serious disadvantages to each of the proposals on the table. Then they are not decisive and action-oriented. Rather, they dither and feel frustrated, because they seem to be wasting time in

endlessly processing the same issues. They often tend to interpret their uncertainty as a failure of the courage to decide; I am more likely to interpret it as the expression of an unacknowledged need for deeper learning.

### **A Vicious Spiral Impedes Learning**

People are motivated by task urgency to decide quickly and move ahead, but uncertainty, anxiety and fear of failure lead them to spend large amounts of time in inconclusive meetings, and in other unproductive busyness.

Most inhabitants of large organizations feel most secure when carrying out the structured, habitual aspects of their jobs in which they know they can be successful. Within this familiar milieu they are decisive. In the face of the unknown and the ambiguous, they are risk averse, and to make a decision feels too risky. Figure 24.1. shows how the aversion to risk under task uncertainty reinforces the bias for action.

#### Figure 24.1. Forces Reinforcing the Bias for Action

Often the decision feels risky because the situation does not lend itself to *solving* the problem at hand; rather, there is a *dilemma* that requires that the participants make and live with the consequences of a choice between alternatives leading to a mixture of desirable and undesirable outcomes.

The amount of time spent in meetings increases the sense of urgency, and the urgency further reduces readiness to engage in reflective deliberations.

To men and women of action, reflection and deep investigation are often seen as not leading sufficiently quickly to concrete results. They would rather do something now, and then take their next steps based on the result. Thus, much of the problem solving in organizations takes place through trial and error. Unfortunately, trial and error problem solving only leads to a permanent fix if the true causes of the problems are close in time and space to their effects. If they are hidden in the complexities of a larger system, then this method of problem solving usually exacerbates the problems.

Another reason for avoiding deep reflection is that it initially leads to experiencing the situation as more complex than it appears at first, thus increasing people's anxiety and frustration. In this way, learning activities that might eventually lead to a greater sense of clarity about the choices involved and to greater comfort with the outcomes are avoided because in the short term they increase pain.

It requires courage and will to break the spiral by taking the time to examine situations in greater depth and complexity. The encouragement of a consultant helps; the support of a higher authority is more potent. More effective still is a supportive organization culture in which demands for change and ever higher performance are balanced by compassion for human frailty—for the doubts, fears, reluctance and resentment that most of us experience when we are required to change and grow. In such an organization we do not always have to project an image of competence and confidence. We can share our uncertainties and frustrations, and in sharing, lighten our individual loads.

### **Competition Inhibits Learning**

Learning is restricted by competitive feelings and attitudes. Partly these are caused by the shared personality characteristics fostered by educational and parenting patterns in our culture. These are intensified and fed by reward systems that foster competition. In many if not most organizations, the level of competition is unhealthy and inimical to both individual and corporate learning. Not only does information become a scarce resource in the battle of all against all, but the experimentation and risk-taking that are essential to high order learning are avoided for fear of falling behind others in the endless foot race towards success.

The patterns of information flow and decision-making typical of hierarchical organizations are a serious block to organizational learning. Command (decision-taking) is localized at the top of a pyramid, as far as possible from the source of information about problems and difficulties in operations, changes in the environment, and inputs from external stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, community, etc. Information is supposed to flow upwards, and power (decisions, evaluation, etc.) flows downwards. Lateral communication is poorly provided for.

Learning occurs most readily when there is a clear and rapid connection between action taken, and results. Because of the length of time required for information to move upwards in the organization, and because of the serious distortions in the accuracy of feedback brought about by people's responses to power, it is difficult for the decision makers at the top to learn from the consequences of their actions.

#### Consequences of the bias for action

Because these barriers exist, it is easier in organizations to act than it is to learn, and it is easier to act individually than it is to act together with others. The bias for action has been

mostly positive in our past history, when what was required to succeed was high energy, and the courage to take risks. We are now in a time when its consequences are mostly negative.

In the past, organizations have learned slowly and relatively unconsciously through their reactions to internal and external changes. They learned by endeavoring to solve problems as they came up, isolating each problem and implementing a solution without much consideration of how the problem was connected systemically to other aspects of the organization's operations. When applying a solution in one place caused another problem somewhere else, that problem was again addressed in isolation. Things did tend to get better, but slowly, and with many fits and starts. However, where the environment of an organization does not change very rapidly, such an approach to organizational learning does work; through trial and error over time, it produces an increasingly good fit between organizational arrangements and such environmental realities as markets, sources of supply, workforce characteristics, etc.

The method of learning described above is highly action-oriented. It is based on the assumption that there is something we can call "getting it right," and we can approach it incrementally through closer and closer approximations. Thus the more quickly we implement each trial solution, the more quickly we approach our goal of excellence. The emphasis is on ferreting out problems and applying solutions with energy and dispatch.

Achievement-oriented organizations are usually highly biased towards action and towards learning through concrete experience and active experimentation, as opposed to observation, reflection, theory-building and intuition. People tend to embody their learning in action routines, and so are often only semi-conscious of what they know. They do not develop their experience to a higher level of generality. There develops a "ready, fire, aim" mentality

that puts organization members always in the thick of the battle, where each action provokes a response that requires another action. The sense of urgency feeds on itself, and people feel themselves unable to take time out to reflect and to understand.

### **Problem-solving and Action in Complex Organizations**

Two factors now militate against the success of such a primitive approach to organizational learning. One is *complexity* in the systems we are endeavoring to optimize; the other is *close coupling* of the system's parts. When a system is complex, there are many parts, each of which has some relationship with all the other parts and is affected by changes in them. Complex organizations have so many parts that we can never know them all nor specify their relationships with one another. In very complex systems, for example, nuclear reactors, the very process of measuring the operations of the system change its operating characteristics and may make it more difficult to know what is going on.

Closely coupled systems have tight relationships among their parts, such that a change in one part rapidly produces significant change in many other parts. In loosely coupled systems the changes in one part have less of an impact on the other parts, and the changes take longer to spread through the system. For example, continuous process production systems tend to be tightly coupled, while batch processing systems are more loosely coupled.

#### ***Problem Solving: Injurious to Organizational Health?***

When we intervene in one part of a complex system, we have, in addition to the intended effects on the part of the system we have targeted, many unintended effects in all the other parts of the system. When the system is loosely coupled, these effects have relatively small impact, and their spread is slow. When the system is closely coupled, the unintended effects we produce

with our problem-solving in one part of the organization are substantial, and they occur quite rapidly.

Thus, in complex and closely coupled systems, local problem-solving quickly creates many unintended effects in other parts of the system, some of which will become problems for the people involved in those parts. Those people in turn engage in more local problem-solving, creating more problems elsewhere. Soon the system begins to churn, and people find themselves working harder and harder just to solve internally generated problems produced by others' problem-solving attempts. Because of the bias for action (as opposed to understanding) that exists in most of our organizations, the pressure created by this vicious circle leads to more and more frantic activity, and less and less thoughtful consideration of what is actually going on and how events are actually related to one another in each problem situation. In these circumstances, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say, paraphrasing the Surgeon General, that "problem-solving may be injurious to your organization's health."

### ***The Bias for Action as Addiction***

Like the Surgeon General's warning against cigarette smoking, my injunction against problem-solving points to a common addiction. It is the addictive quality of action and problem-solving that makes them so difficult to change. I think of addiction as any pattern of behavior that is engaged in order to reduce pain and fear, and that cannot be given up without experiencing the pain and fear that it masks. After years of careful observation, I have become convinced that the frenetic action and local problem-solving that goes on in organizations today is only partially driven by rational work considerations, and is largely part of the addictive syndrome that has been called "workaholism." My observations suggest that the pain and fear

which are masked by workaholic norms in organizations are loneliness and disconnection from others; the fear of failure and inadequacy; and the despair and shame involved in putting one's energy, talent and creativity into an economic system that each of us intuitively knows is destructive of human health and human values because it is ecologically unsustainable.

The pain of each of those concerns becomes greatest when we take time to be still and quiet. It is eased by activity, and especially by activity involving high drama. I believe that in many of the organizations I work with, the sense of drama and urgency masks deep despair and nameless dread, and that our bias for action keeps that despair at bay. Needless to say, this point of view is not popular with clients; it isn't even popular with me! Like them, I find ease and a sense of meaning in getting involved in their dramas, and my fears of inadequacy are kept at bay by doing my work in ways that are seen as competent, if not always brilliant.

A great deal has been learned about the treatment of addictions in Alcoholics Anonymous and its offshoots. While this is not the place to explore in depth how that work might be applied to organizations, it is worth noting that love and support, being challenged to tell the truth about oneself, and having a spiritual life, all seem to be important ingredients. Methods that include these components can be used to move towards an understanding of the addictive patterns in our ways of doing and being in organizations, and hence towards freeing ourselves of dependence upon them. However, having said this, I also have to say that a shared addiction (or any shared defense against reality) is the most difficult of issues for a consultant to get constructively addressed by clients. Often, one has to wait until the organization "hits bottom" in the sense of experiencing more pain from the addiction than from the concerns and fears that it masks.



Nothing said here is meant to imply that hard work, high energy and dedication to the task are in themselves negative or unhealthy, either in organizations or for individuals. It is the meaning and purpose of these patterns that needs to be questioned and confronted, not their existence.

For some time there has been a theme in management writing that deplores the short-term thinking and preoccupation with the bottom-line that has become endemic in North American business. That theme points in the same direction as my own reasoning above. There is a general apprehension that we are not addressing the real problems, that we are not thinking long enough or wide enough. Certainly when our focus shifts from individual businesses to the larger economic system, or to the global environment, it is clear that continued preoccupation with immediate solutions to local issues is seriously damaging and may destroy those systems upon which we depend for our survival and comfort.

### **Beyond the Barriers**

I have only explored two of the barriers to learning in organizations in this paper. There are others such as

- Inability to acknowledge publicly aspects of the organization's doing and being that are contrary to the ways organization leaders and members would like to think about themselves. This produces incongruity and undermines integrity.
- Unmet needs for healing in organizations undergoing major change. Little attention is given to working through the mix of strong emotions produced by high levels of change.

Consultants who are attempting to encourage learning within organizations will have their own candidates. They will also each have their ways to assist managers in going beyond the barriers. In this chapter I shall limit myself to identifying factors currently operating within organizations that must be addressed by any viable approach to organizational learning.

As I indicated at the outset of this paper, a key tenet of my learning-oriented approach is that when we endeavor to increase the capacity of an organization or group to learn, we must involve clients in the design and creation of their own learning at each and every step along the way. One of my practices as a learning-oriented consultant is to educate clients to carry out activities normally thought to be part of my role as the professional consultant.

I follow a principle I call “maximum feasible choice.” In designing learning experiences, I ask myself at each choice point, “Is there a compelling reason why I should be making this decision or carrying out this learning activity, instead of giving the responsibility to the learner or client?” At times there is such a reason, but by asking the question, I usually find that my clients can do for themselves many of the things I used to do for them, thus enhancing their ability to manage their own learning.

I find that the moment one adopts the principle of maximum feasible choice, it reframes the contract between client and consultant to one that is about *learning together*. It moves us away from conducting events that are “set pieces,” and towards collaboratively designed events that arise organically from the work we are doing together.

I have developed three criteria for determining what constitutes maximum feasible choice.

- Clients have, or can get, sufficient information to make an informed decision about the issue in question.
- The decision is relevant to their interests; they have a stake in the outcome.
- They are willing to take responsibility for the outcomes of the decision.

Sometimes I do not know until part way through the process whether the criteria are truly met or not. I intentionally tend to err on the side of taking risks on clients' willingness and ability to manage their own learning.

### **A Learning Frame for Consulting**

I approach new clients as a facilitator of their learning. The message I endeavor to communicate through my words and actions includes the following:

***I deeply believe in the capacity of each of my client organizations to learn that which is necessary for them to move through their dilemmas and ahead in their development.*** Your organization has within it the capacity to learn what you need to learn, and very probably there are people here now who have the knowledge and wisdom that is needed to address your situation effectively. Your organization probably does not know that it knows what it needs to address its problems, and that is one of the issues we shall address in my work with you.

Organizations as a whole usually have access only to the knowledge they are used to using. The knowledge that is now needed exists in individuals and groups which are not currently being called upon to contribute what they know. Almost certainly there are barriers within the organization against their doing so. In our work together we shall confront and endeavor to understand those barriers, and work to find ways around or through them. In the process you will become more adept learners; you will learn how to learn.

*You do not need a consultant such as myself unless the learning you have to do requires that you confront and revise more or less deeply held and unexamined assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about your work, your organization's culture, and your leadership.* You do not need me in order to undertake first order learning: posing problems and searching for solutions within the matrix of familiar and agreed-upon perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions we call a paradigm. I assume you possess resources and routines for conducting these aspects of your business. I am here to help you go beyond the mental models you currently use to construct reality, and to invent new ones that will produce better business results for you. This second order learning often does require outside help. When we think of our map of reality as reality itself, it does not occur to us to design a better map. My task is to help you identify and describe your mental models, so that you can choose to extend and improve them.

*I commit myself to care about your learning, and also to care about your comfort and well-being in the learning process.* Together we shall address the task of balancing the wish to learn and grow against the fear of learning and the wish to preserve comfort and security. We shall explore our defenses against learning with respect, and we shall try to move beyond them in ways that are effective but which do not do emotional violence to ourselves.

### **Habits and Behaviors of a Learning Oriented Consultant**

Here are ways of doing and being that I find useful in bringing a learning orientation to my consulting. Some are habits of thought and language that I believe facilitate higher order learning, while others could be called "tools."

- A bias for developing wisdom and understanding, in contrast to a bias for action.

- A penchant for working with wholes: the whole system; the inner *and* the outer; the manifest *and* the hidden, the light *and* the dark.
- Identifying fear and other strong negative emotions that block learning, and treating them with warmth, love and support.
- Involving clients in themselves designing and carrying out activities that are normally thought to be part of my role as a professional consultant, such as gathering and analyzing organizational data, and planning and conducting retreats, team development meetings, and the like.
- Appealing to and evoking the inherent deep caring and sense of integrity of my clients.

Learning-oriented consultancy is not easy to sell. Many prospective clients are looking for training events, and many want something that looks and feels like a quick fix, although they are not comfortable in owning that longing. Even when clients are ready to enter into a relationship such as I have outlined above, the road ahead will be challenging and will require great persistence and faith in their own resources. They may grow faint-hearted and give up along the way. They need inspiration and encouragement, and they need to experience a continuing series of “small wins.”

### **Design Criteria for Organizational Learning**

When generating learning experiences I have found the following eight design criteria useful. A good organizational learning process:

- Fosters high energy and commitment in the learning process.

- Builds periods of reflection and generalization into the process, to maximize learning from each experience.
- Supports risk taking on the part of the learner, and supports the learner in reflecting on and learning from failures.
- Effectively uses the resources of others, both outsiders and colleagues.
- Connects the intellect and the emotions in the learning process.
- Makes the learning process into "real work" useful to the organization, and builds accountability for results into the learning process.
- Legitimizes and encourages the use of time and resources for learning, as well as for "getting out the wash."
- Turns the individual's learning into "organizational learning" through integration of the results into "ideas in good currency." These ideas become part of the accepted knowledge and practice of the organization.

Most of these criteria are met poorly if at all by conventional training programs. In the latter, we are typically removed from the work setting into a Role-oriented situation where we learn because it is expected of us, not because we really care about the outcomes. The stakes are small; we are not engaged in real work, and we are not held accountable for the results. Only our heads are involved, not our values, emotions, or operating concerns. When we try to apply our learning back on the job where real risk and consequences result from success or failure, we find the training has not prepared us to integrate our knowledge with our feelings, or to take risks to apply what we have learned. Because in training we are not getting real things done, both we and our supervisors tend to regard learning time as unproductive time. Because others do not see

concrete results of what is learned in training, it tends to remain our individual property. It does not find its way into the shared beliefs, ways of thinking and operating practices that form the "ideas in good currency" within the larger organization.

Of course, learning does take place on the job in the course of our day-to-day activities. But for a variety of reasons, on the job learning tends to be less effective than we would like. We often avoid the discomfort of tackling newer, riskier, less structured tasks, in favor of the familiar and the routine. Because there is always another demand to be met, we tend not to pause and reflect on what we have learned before moving on. If we fail, we may be too involved in avoiding the negative consequences of our failure to spend much time trying to learn from it. Because we believe we are expected to be strong and independent, we often miss opportunities to learn from the help and advice of our colleagues or outside resources.

### **Hope for Organizational Learning**

There are, however, rays of hope, some new, some that have been with us for a long time. The scope of this paper does not permit me to enumerate the connections of others' approaches to organizational learning, but I want to honor some that fit the principles I have outlined above. They include Reg Revans' *Action Learning* (Revans, 1980) Ian Cunningham *Self Managed Learning* (Cunningham, 1994) David Bohm's *Dialogue* (Briggs and Bohm, 1993) Chris Argyris's *Double Loop Learning* (Argyris, 1991; Argyris and Schon, 1974) Fred and Merrelyn Emery's *Future Search Conferences* (Emery, 1993) Scott Peck's approach to building *Community* (Peck, 1987) and the *Technology of Participation*, pioneered by The Institute for Cultural Affairs (Spencer, 1989).

### **The Future of Organizational Learning**

The only thing new about our focus on learning is the focus. Learning has always been there. It has taken the increasing speed of change and the resulting obsolescence of knowledge to make clear that now the learning *process* is more important than the content being learnt.

That change in focus can have a profound influence on how we experience *organizational* life. It is only when we speak of learning a specific skill or piece of knowledge that learning becomes static, with a beginning, middle, and end. When we give learning its central place in the dynamics of our organizational lives, when we nurture it with our best talents, and when we give it the resource of *time*, then we can experience its dynamism.

The difference between dynamic and static ways of thinking about organizations is increasingly significant. For example, we have tended to view change as going from one state of affairs, how things are now, to another, how we want things to be. In that mode of thinking, only the process of going from one static state to another is dynamic. That way of thinking may have sufficed when things were slower moving, but today there is no static state—change is continuous, and we never arrive at an end state. When we apprehend our experience in static terms we are doomed to continual frustration. Each desired state of affairs that we achieve immediately begins to slide into obsolescence. We find ourselves confused and off balance, as we initiate yet another problem solving change project to take care of the next set of difficulties.

We need fluid and flexible organizations today as never before, and their appropriate shape and dominant processes are still unknown. We lack models for how to organize such entities. We don't know how much they will look like the organizations we are familiar with, but I suspect they will be wildly different. The principles of conscious learning will be a major force in determining their shape and ways of functioning. Organizations that embody these principles



will continually change—conscious learning about the tasks they do, and about the wider environment in which they operate will direct those change processes.

We set ourselves “ends” as goals to attain but it is worth remembering that we never live in those ends, we live in the “means.” On the individual level, learning as a dynamic process is what keeps things alive for us, what makes the world new. For many of us, our experiences of formal learning deny us such personal renewal, and we must recognize that in any learning enterprise, the learning challenge needs to be at a level that is manageable for the learner. Should the challenge be too great it will only serve to trigger a defensive reaction, and learning will not take place. On the other hand, should the challenge, the newness, be too little it will not be perceived as worthy of our involvement. Operating within acceptable limits of challenge will keep life fresh. There is a degree to which the nature of the learning is much less relevant than that learning takes place. The stimulus provided, the questioning that occurs and the enlivening it induces, all justify a learning *orientation*, quite aside from the benefits of the specific content learnt.

Such a learning orientation will have positive consequences for the kind of organizations we have. Many of us dream of humane workplaces where people are able to enlarge themselves, express their creativity, and work within a supportive environment, and we can realize them only through a learning focus. It will not be easy. When we reflect on the two barriers to learning we have examined here, and consider what we shall have to do to dismantle the barriers, we see that we shall have to make major changes in how we live our organizational lives. We shall have to accept the challenge to acknowledge the powerful negative emotions engendered by much that goes on from day to day in organizations and to begin exploring ways to deal with them. We

shall have to resist flinging ourselves into action to quiet our anxieties and, instead, take the time to reflect before acting. Each of these will profoundly impact our organizational life experience.

That is the challenge of this chapter. Without addressing these barriers there will be no effective learning organization. The benefits of addressing the barriers can be great. May this be a case where our pragmatism, driven by our competitive need to learn as individuals and organizations, leads in the direction of our highest dreams for organizations, and the highest good for our Planet!