

The learning organisation?

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The learning organisation

The concept of 'a learning organisation' has brought about both interest and excitement among business managers, personnel managers, educational consultants, organisational consultants, as well as researchers and authors in the field of organisational theory. Why is that? One of the main arguments for the concept is the following:

The speed of change in our global society is greatly on the increase. Lengthy and stable periods, from which the future can be predicted and planned, are rare. Thus, the most important parameter for an organisation's competitiveness is its ability to change into 'a learning organisation'.

In my work as an organisational consultant I have come across many managers and employees who are working very hard in order to deal with this process of change. I have also met managers who declare: "The management has decided that we are now a learning organisation". I understand why they feel that they can declare this so easily, as the concept invites to being worn like a new pair of pants which can be shown off with pride. Essentially, however, the concept is a mystification: organisations cannot learn. organisations cannot perceive, think or act. Only humans are capable of learning. The organisation is merely the framework for the learning experience of managers and employees.

Basically, it is pure nonsense to talk about a more or less learning organisation - or one that does not learn at all. A prerequisite to learning is a human mind and body. Nevertheless, the extensive literature on 'the learning organisation' contains several relevant points with great potential and richness of perspectives. This is also the case with the many valuable experiences of managers and employees trying to create 'a learning organisation'.

So - while we search for a more appropriate name for the concept - let us embrace and study the line of thinking behind this concept. This thinking is important, not only due to the above mentioned reason, but also because it is a part of and supports a shift in paradigm in the society of today: A shift which becomes increasingly visible within the fields of management, consultancy work, teaching and counselling. This shift can be illustrated in the following way:

A shift in paradigm

From To

Knowledge has permanent validity Knowledge has temporary validity

Knowledge = Adding of information from the outside Knowledge = Insight created from within

Learning activates the intellect Learning activates thoughts, values, emotions and action

The right answers must be found The central questions must be formulated

The expert finds the right solution New ways and new methods are co-created by the employees

The way of thinking underlying the right side of the box is becoming more and more widespread. It is not, however, a complete replacement of the left side which is still applicable when the issue at hand is relatively simple, and one correct and obviously superior solution exists. The fact of the matter is, however, that a growing number of the issues facing managers and employees in organisations are very complex and can lead to many different solutions with often unforeseen consequences. In such cases the right-sided way of thinking is much more suitable. The literature on 'the learning organisation' is based on the way of thinking of the right side and raises two very important questions:

1. How are organisations best structured and managed in order to allow for the individual manager and employee to create new insight which can be put into action?
2. How can individual processes of learning lead to collective processes of learning, i.e. shared knowledge which can be transformed into new business strategies, new product development, new personnel policies, competence development, etc.?

Based on my many years of experience as an organisational consultant I have come across four key prerequisites which must be present in order to achieve the goals of 'the learning organisation':

1. New attitudes to learning

Firstly, new attitudes toward what learning entails must be created within the organisation. In other words, both managers and employees must learn to learn. Most of us hold some very inappropriate attitudes which we acquired during our school years. Indirectly we learned the following:

- Do not make mistakes.
- Do not reveal that there is something you do not know.
- Do not make a fool of yourself.
- Know that the teacher is always right.
- What counts is the individual achievement.
- If you ask the person sitting next to you, you are cheating.

We know from our school days that these were the rules we had to abide by in order to achieve high marks and become successful. This was our school wisdom. As a adult in an organisation, however, all of these rules must be un-learned. And that is not easy as these attitudes are strongly ingrained in many of us. They do not, however, foster being an active player in 'the learning organisation' which is governed by the following, very

different, set of rules:

- Learn from your mistakes.
- It is a good thing to admit that there is something you do not know.
- It is important to explain what you wonder about.
- What matters is teamwork.
- Know that your manager may be wrong.
- When there is something you do not know, ask your colleague.

These rules may be called a new wisdom.

Fundamental attitudes are very difficult to change, and it is thus very important how managers respond to how the employees act. For instance, if a manager castigates an employee for having made a mistake, sees questions as a sign of stupidity, or decides salaries on the basis of individual achievements, the employee may well see this as supporting the school wisdom which is in the way of 'the learning organisation'. In order to be able to support and strengthen the employee's belief in the new wisdom, the manager must have put his old beliefs behind him – not just in words, but in actions too. The employee learns from what the manager does – not from what he says.

2. Positive expectations

Secondly, it is of great importance that the manager has positive expectations to his employees. In the last couple of decades, a growing number of research results indicating that positive expectations lead to positive outcomes have appeared within various research fields. Especially in the fields of medicine, teaching and mental fitness in sports this effect has been obvious. The effect can be seen as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: What we expect to see actually happens. In teaching, this effect has been demonstrated in hundreds of real-life experiments which essentially revolves around a teacher being pre-informed about which students are intelligent and which are dumb. Teaching is then observed by the researchers, and the students' marks are recorded. By the end of the school year it turns out that the intelligent students receive high marks, while the dumb students receive poor marks.

At first glance this may not appear strange. However, the information given to the teacher at the start of the experiment was incorrect. In fact there was no difference in the achievements of the two groups of students prior to the experiment. How come the experiment showed a significant difference? The explanation may lie in several interesting psychological dynamics:

In every class situation the teacher is exposed to a multitude of input from the students. It is impossible to pay attention to everything, and the teacher must thus choose to focus on something and overlook other things – in making such choices his expectations play a major role: It is easy for him to notice when the so-called smart students say something correct, and when the so-called dumb students say something incorrect or nothing at all. The positive attention paid to the 'smarter' students makes the teacher focus more on these students and ask them more questions. They are thus given the opportunity to be active, which gives the teacher the opportunity to praise them. The 'smart' students feel important and appreciated and their want to participate increases even more. They thus show more of what they are good at, while the 'dumb' students feel neglected, unimportant and uninteresting. A beneficial cycle has been established between the teacher and the 'smart' students, while a vicious cycle has been established between the teacher and the 'dumb' students. This experiment has been replicated in several versions but always with the same result: The teacher's expectations to the achievement of the students are a very influential factor, regardless of the fact that these dynamics occur on a subconscious level for both the teacher and the students.

Similar experiments have not been carried out in organisations, but I suspect that similar forces are at play: The manager's expectations to the employees' achievement are a very influential factor, not only on the interaction between manager and employee but also on the actual achievement of the individual employee. If the manager expects a certain employee to make many mistakes, the manager will focus his attention on this. If he, on the other hand, expects the employee to come up with excellent ideas, his attention will be focused on the innovative thinking of the employee, and he is likely to find something extremely exciting in the employee's statements.

In 'the learning organisation' the organisational culture will be influenced by mutually positive expectations which will help individuals perform at their best and thus create healthy and beneficial cycles.

3. Appreciative management

It is, however, a prerequisite that management is appreciative. Appreciation has the same effect on humans as fertiliser has on plants. Many managers hold the belief that an important part of their work lies in localizing mistakes and pointing out deficits in the way both the organisation and the employees function. Problem and deficit thinking focuses our attention on what does not work. Within this line of thinking, unsatisfactory results, mistakes, complaints and criticism are regarded as the best starting point for learning. Quality control systems have very much supported this attitude.

In a particular organisation, a customers questionnaire revealed that 98 % of the customers were satisfied while two percent were dissatisfied. Consequently, the management formed five working groups which were to investigate the different reasons behind the dissatisfaction. The management had the best intentions: "When we know what the customers are dissatisfied with, and when our employees realise where they fail, then we can make the necessary changes and achieve 100 % satisfaction among our customers". This is an example of a very rational and analytic kind of logic: 'First, we must know what the reasons for the problem are, and then we change those reasons'. However, as a multitude of testimonies show, reality is not always this simple.

Systems may function in this simple manner, but humans do not. Spending time, effort and endless discussions on deficits and problems has its price: Deficit and problem

thinking consumes energy. Behind this line of thinking lies the peculiar belief that we not only can learn from mistakes and deficits, but that we in fact best learn from mistakes and deficits. The intention is very good, but the desired effect does not occur. Why wonder about the two percent dissatisfied customers instead of trying to learn more about the skills, knowledge, collaboration, etc. which made it possible for 98 % of the customers to be satisfied?

Learning from success creates energy, invites to dialogue and enhances creativity. This is where the appreciative management style enters the scene. The manager who sees his employees' resources, appreciates when things go well, and encourages a positive investigation of the necessary competencies is a manager who helps his organisation become 'a learning organisation'.

4. Dialogue

Finally, in order to become 'a learning organisation' the members of the organisation need to use dialogue as a way of communicating. Individual learning does not necessarily lead to collective learning. New knowledge from external courses or internal further training must be assimilated into specific work assignments and the particular organisational culture. In this process, it becomes an important issue and determining factor which ways of communication are predominantly used in the organisation in question.

In some organisations 'the fierce debate' or 'the polite conversation' are predominantly used. The point of the fierce debate is to argue one's own views and to persuade the counter part. The debate often turns into a fight to win or lose. In order to win one has to point out and take apart the weaker arguments of the counterpart. On the other hand, the point of the polite conversation is to be kind and to exchange well-known points of view. The relationship is nurtured, and time is passed in a pleasant way. In important negotiations it can be necessary to practice the polite conversation in order to protect the relation. However, neither the fierce debate nor the polite conversation facilitates learning, and they rarely lead to change or development.

In order to achieve learning, change and development, members of the organisation must master either 'the competent discussion' or 'the dialogue'. In the competent discussion all parties have an interest in hearing as many arguments as possible, and in listening actively and with a focus on exploration to what the others say and express – also in between the lines. The purpose of the competent discussion is to create the most solid and broad foundation for clarifying, prioritising and reaching decisions on a particular issue. The purpose of the dialogue is the creation of new knowledge and insight. The dialogue is somewhat similar to the competent discussion, but it differs in the way that it expands the scope of investigation. Furthermore, the participants make their personal views visible to others and invite to constructive criticism. The competent discussion as well as the dialogue are forms of communication which facilitate the creation of collective learning processes. They are, however, not easy to master.

