



WHAT MAKES A LEARNING ORGANISATION?

The knowledge economy is propelling organisations into a constantly evolving state where they achieve through identifying how they can sustainably adapt and develop in response to the continually changing, 21st century world. The concept of the 'learning organisation' has grown out of this need to find new ways of doing business, new products and new markets, all in order to meet the changing and diverse needs and expectations of customers, stakeholders and society at large – and doing so with often limited or diminishing resources. ALIA's Director Professional Services, Janetta Mascilongo, asks what does it take to become a learning organisation?

Sustainable, long-term performance is possible through an organisational commitment to learning, which it establishes and maintains through a systematic approach to managing human and technical capital. As anyone working in the field of education will tell you, for real learning to occur there needs to be a supportive framework around the learner, including a learning experience that offers relevant content and context, quality teaching, encouragement to ask questions and challenge the status quo, and opportunities not only to explore and experiment with new ideas and knowledge, but also to share and make contributions with the learnings gained. The learners themselves must be engaged and motivated to learn.

In most organisations, the idea of staff development and training is not new, however it is frequently offered in a way that is ad hoc and not necessarily aligned with actual learning needs of employees, nor the development of the organisation's core business. The application of learning to a real work context also often remains unrealised, leaving employees feeling frustrated and confused as to why they were sent to do training in the first place.

Given the costs of staff development and the commitment asked of employees to participate, it makes sense to achieve some return on investment by ensuring employee needs, organisational strategic directions (and the corresponding core capabilities required to achieve them) and practical outcomes through the application of learning are included in staff development planning.

Organisational learning challenges organisations to embrace and embed learning practices throughout their activities, processes and policies wherever possible. Employees must be actively encouraged and supported to take up any opportunities for learning and to apply their learning at work to improve or create processes, products and services which enhance performance. Individual and group learning, support for workshops, seminars and courses are all part of an organisation's toolkit for staff learning. Developing and updating specialist professional expertise is a part of this learning strategy, as is building

capacity in communication, conflict resolution, creativity, diversity, flexibility and adaptability. Leaders must set employees up to succeed and facilitate their progress, otherwise all they are doing is paying lip service to the notion of organisational learning.

Leaders and managers must establish an appropriate culture and climate for learning. This requires a shared understanding amongst all about organisational values, attitudes and behaviours. Trust, openness and honesty are essential ingredients in the learning process. The rationale for change and learning must be transparent - without hidden agendas - so that employees can feel secure in their jobs.

Trust enables real participation in learning opportunities. This is important because learning involves uncertainty, risk taking and the possibility of making mistakes. Divulging what one doesn't know or understand can be confronting for leaders and employees alike, and this needs to be accepted and worked through in order to achieve positive learning outcomes.

In any organisation, there is a possibility that certain groups of employees might be marginalised. For example, frontline employees are often left to staff service

points instead of attending important meetings or staff development sessions – managers either being unwilling or unable to bring in casual staff or close the service point for half a day to accommodate some time release for their staff. Yet they, and the part time employees working shifts covering periods when there are few or no full-time employees

on duty can offer really useful information about client needs or expectations and opportunities for improving service.

The learning organisation is transparent, shares knowledge and engages its employees to participate in organisational reviews, developments and projects. It challenges teams and departments to work together to find solutions to meet the changing needs of clients, adapt to changing technologies or accommodate reduced budgets.

The need for change affords organisations the opportunity to learn and to explore creative solutions and previously unthinkable innovations. The flexibility and adaptability required to gain new knowledge and learn new ways of doing things offers challenges and diversity in the workplace that can be both empowering and engaging for employees. A supportive framework, appropriate facilitation and a culture that encourages individual and shared learning are all elements of the learning organisation.

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