

Analyzing the loops and taking the steps on the journey toward a learning organization

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In this issue of *The Learning Organization*, the articles focus on providing clarity to overcome the vagueness often associated with defining the learning organization. Dr Nancy Dixon and Dr Max Visser provide case studies to benefit practitioners in envisaging an organization design or routines enacted by management to expand learning ability of an organization. These case studies assist readers in understanding how one organization applied four dimensions to promote learning and how another organization managed the routines that led to learning.

Dr Ricardo Chiva and Dr Bernard Simonin both provide practitioners with perceptive views of the levels of learning within the organization. Practitioners can relate the views presented in these articles to assess their own organization to promote an understanding of exactly where their organization now resides on the learning journey.

Finally, Dr Rob Poell and Dr Ferd Van der Krogt afford the readers with an interpretation of learning network theory, whereby the reader can appreciate more about the linkages between human resource development (HRD) activities and the network perspective. Ultimately, the study leads to HRD as the guide for the organization through a learning journey. For a practitioner of any position within the organization, this article aids in understanding the advantage of HRD to the learning network. The understanding of the learning network theory as termed by the authors leads to approaches that could be practical to improve learning within any organization.

There is no one solution manual to generating the learning organization. Often just too many variables exist to clearly illustrate the direct correlation between action or design and result in a manner applicable to every organization. Or, more appropriately, no two organizations are entirely the same. Therefore, at least understanding the levels of learning places some similarities upon which practitioners can stimulate action. However, replication of successes in one organization may be problematic in another. But, the insights from this issue of *The Learning Organization* can support practitioners to better assess their organization, understand how functions work together from a learning network view and learn from case studies how to augment their organization's learning journey.

The summary contains three sections aligned with the introduction above:

- (1) describe the levels of learning in learning organizations;
- (2) outline how HRD promotes learning through learning network theory; and



- (3) summarize case studies that illustrate methods to promote learning organizations.

In an endeavor to clarify the levels of learning, Dr Ricardo Chiva and Dr Bernard Simonin expand on the study of learning organizations by way of learning levels. Both articles offer insights for practitioners in analysis of the organization.

Dr Simonin in “Of Hedgehog, Fox, Dodo Bird, and Sphinx” affords the reader clarity in understanding the N-loops. Those less familiar with the concept will find Dr Simonin’s archetypes and Table I, which is copied below from Dr Simonin’s text, most illustrative, as the definitions and archetypes are linked for clarity. Throughout the article, for a practitioner who admittedly may not fall directly under Dr Simonin’s stated audience, quick approaches to assess one’s own organization appear. Most interesting is the concept that “corresponding loops occur simultaneously not sequentially”. Therefore, as a practitioner analyzes her organization against the hierarchy levels, she may discover a dodo bird, hedgehog, fox and sphinx all living together in the organization. This co-existence may cause the practitioner to reflect and seek elaboration, which in turn may lead toward Dr Simonin’s ultimate call for the initiation of additional empirical research into the area of learning levels.

Dr Chiva in “The Learning Organization and Level of Consciousness” also defines the levels of learning addressed by Dr Simonin. However, Dr Chiva investigates the learning organization through the lens of levels of consciousness and then links the levels with organizational structure. Dr Chiva integrates the concepts in Table II, which is copied below. Through clear analysis of the concepts, Dr Chiva affords practitioners information for better analyzing their organizational structure and current position along the learning journey.

N-Loop learning	Argyris and others	Bateson’s categories of learning	Archetype
$N = 0$	–	Learning 0	Dodo bird
$N = 1$	Single-loop	Learning I	Hedgehog
$N = 2$	Double-loop	Learning II	Fox
$N = 3$	Triple-loop	Learning III	Sphinx
$N = 4$	Quadruple-loop	Learning IV	

Table I.
N-Loop learning
correspondence
(extracted from Dr
Simonin)

Organization	Level of consciousness	Level of organizational learning	Organizational structure
The control-autocratic organization	Power and domination (red)	Zero learning	Simple
The control-bureaucratic organization	Order and rules (blue)	Single-loop learning	Machine
The control-meritocratic organization	Achievement and autonomy (orange)	Double-loop learning	Diversified
The commitment organization	Cooperation and tolerance (green)	Deutero-learning or meta-learning	Professional and missionary
The learning organization	Common welfare and holism (teal)	Triple-loop learning	Innovative

Table II.
Organizations, levels
of consciousness and
organizational
learning (extracted
from Dr Chiva)

To support Dr Chiva and Dr Simonin's methods to analyze the organization, Dr Rob Poell and Dr Ferd Van der Krogt in "Why is organizing human resource development so problematic?" provide guidance on how the human resource department can support the organization. The authors outline three approaches to organizing HRD: a training issue, a learning issue and a strategic issue. After introducing the three approaches, Dr Poell and Dr Van der Krogt present learning network theory as an integrating approach. The authors offer a comparison table to aid readers in understanding the approaches, and practitioners benefit from understanding more clearly how HRD should understand holistically the employee, learning experiences and career development. It is significant to note that Dr Poell and Dr Van der Krogt have offered a second paper to elaborate on two aspects. But, that article will appear in a later issue of the *Learning Organization* journal.

The articles by Dr Chiva, Dr Simonin, Dr Poell and Dr Van der Krogt provide theoretical views applicable in practice. To illustrate examples, the articles by Dr Max Visser and Dr Nancy Dixon offer two case studies of organization design (dimensions) and routines that a practitioner can duplicate.

Dr Visser in "Teaching Giants to Learn" synthesizes prior learning organization literature into four dimensions to dispel prior beliefs that large organizations cannot become learning organizations. He then provides the comparative case of the German and US Army in the Second World War to aid readers in understanding how the dimensions interact to create a learning organization. For consideration by practitioners listed below are Dr Visser's four dimensions:

- (1) degree of empowerment or decentralization independence;
- (2) degree of error openness;
- (3) degree of knowledge conversion; and
- (4) degree of adequate human resource management and development.

Although Dr Visser focuses on large organizations, these four dimensions present to any practitioner a foundation upon which to assess or question his organization.

While Dr Visser tackles the question of large organizations, Dr Dixon in "Learning Together and Working Apart" focuses on the question of how to promote learning in the virtual team. Dr Dixon outlines how leaders can build the routines that promote the three elements that teams must have to learn effectively:

- (1) broad-generalized goals;
- (2) independence in finding multiple ways to reach the goals; and
- (3) trust or feeling of psychological safety to make knowledge available to all.

Dr Dixon provides a case study with ProQuest to illustrate how leaders within the organization developed routines that lead toward effective learning. Dr Dixon's case presents practitioners with a series of methods anyone can utilize to develop routines that promote learning.

Through the articles presented in this issue of the *Learning Organization*, practitioners can acquire some insightful approaches to evaluate their organization. Then, after understanding the organization's current status, practitioners can better appreciate some mechanisms to proceed along the journey toward becoming a learning organization.

Further reading

- Chiva, R. (2017), "The learning organization and the level of consciousness", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 150-158.
- Dixon, N. (2017), "Learning together and working apart: routines for organizational learning in virtual teams", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 138-149.
- Poell, R.F. and van der Krogt, F. (2017), "Why is organizing human resource development so problematic? Perspectives from the learning-network theory (Part 1)", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 180-193.
- Simonin, B.L. (2017), "N-loop learning: part I – of hedgehog, fox, dodo bird and sphinx", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 169-179.
- Visser, M. (2017), "Teaching giants to learn: lessons from army learning in World War II", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 159-168.

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