

Approaches to help the practitioner determine “are we a learning organization”

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Abstract

Purpose – The “Implication for practitioners” paper summarizes the articles within this issue of *The Learning Organization* in an easy-to-digest format for the practitioner audience. This paper aims to outline how in practice the structure and people and the interplay of both have an impact in creating a learning organization. Included in the paper is a summary of articles within this issue that outline different studies that can easily lead toward actions in practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The summary identifies specific elements from the articles within this issue that can be applied in practice.

Findings – This issue of *The Learning Organization* is full of content to help practitioners think more deeply about assessing their organization and offers application of tools that can be easily applied in any organization.

Practical implications – The “Implication for practitioners” paper aims to outline areas where the articles can be further applied. The articles within this issue outline how structure and characteristics (or people) can provide a significant impact on developing a learning organization.

Originality/value – Readers can gain value in reading this summary, as it outlines some of the many practical ideas outlined within the articles of this issue of *The Learning Organization*.

Keywords Learning organization, Learning, Organization design

Paper type Research paper

The building blocks or structure, the people or characteristics and the interplay of both can create positive or negative impact in creating a learning organization. This issue of *The Learning Organization* provides practitioners with a unique view of organization assessment tools. The tools discussed in this issue apply in the evaluation of different organizational structures and characteristics. For a practitioner, the ability to consistently gauge an organization against a benchmark can be invaluable in the challenge to uncover areas of improvement. Or more important for an HR professional, the tools may simply answer the question “Are we a learning organization?”. However, just as the definition of the learning organization elicits differing reactions, so do the many tools provided in this issue. It is difficult to align tools if the fundamental conceptual descriptions vary. Therefore, many tools lack validation in the broad context. Fortunately, upon completion of these issues, practitioners will have at least three tools to further explore and deliberate when evaluating their organizational context. Also, within this issue, readers will find a case study of “power in learning organizations” and Part 1 of a study of learning structure and learning to further magnify their understanding of how structure and characteristics of the team impact



learning. Finally the issue closes with an interview of a leader in the learning organization field. The diverse topics of this issue can lead the practitioner to an extensive understanding of application ideas for any organization.

The issue begins with a thought-provoking study of organizational structure impact on learning. [Sitar and Skerlavaj \(2018\)](#) in “Learning-structure fit Part I: conceptualizing the relationship between organizational structure and employee learning assert” that “the research supports the argument that the structure determines how employees learn in the workplace, and which learning activities are acceptable, or preferred in specific organizational designs” (pp. 294-304). The authors describe how knowledge sourcing, learning styles and learning loops are all structurally dependent, as they contrast the organic and inorganic organization design. The authors propose the practical implication that structural design can transform learning. As they describe, “when environmental uncertainty is high, an organic structure is appropriate” (pp. 362-365). A final guide to practitioners from this article, when implementing structure, considers how the structure influences learning inside the organization.

In addition to structure, another critical point in developing a learning organization is the ability of those involved to reinforce the process of power in embracing triple-loop learning. Or as mentioned earlier, how the characteristics of people impact the learning environment. In “A systematic approach to processes of power in learning organizations,” [Flood and Romm \(2018\)](#) recount a case study with the “500 school project”. In the case, the authors illustrate the significance of a facilitator to create transformation by conveying the message of “the power to enact empowering designs, the power to co-develop responsible decision-making, and the power to transform our relations with each other” (pp. 344-352). This article illustrates how a few characteristics of the facilitators can impact practices to encourage learning, which can be critical for practice.

Three other articles in this issue guide practitioners into an understanding of tools to aid in evaluation of learning organizations. [Chatterjee et al.’s \(2018\)](#) article, “Learning transfer system inventory (LTSI) and knowledge creation in organizations” illustrates the linkage points of [Nonaka \(1994\)](#) and [Nonaka and Takeuchi’s \(1995\)](#) socialization externalization combination internalization (SECI) model with learning transfer system inventory (LTSI) introduced by [Holton et al. \(2000\)](#). Ultimately the authors aim to provide the LTSI as a method for a more empirical study of the SECI within organizations. Throughout the article, the authors illustrate the linkages and provide compelling reason that indeed the LTSI, with “validation in various context and cultures” (pp. 320-330), offers practitioners a tool for evaluating knowledge creation within the organization. As the authors conclude, “the LTSI factors are the intangible influencers which can enhance knowledge transfer once the systems are in place” (pp. 305-619). Evaluating for these factors lead to a better understanding of the system and yield a useful tool for practitioners to consider.

The next article providing practitioners with a tool is from [Chai and Dirani \(2018\)](#) as they delve into a validation of the DLOQ in “Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ): a validation study in the Lebanese context”. The authors revisit the often-referenced [Watkins and Marsick’s \(1993\)](#) DLOQ and conduct a validation of the shortened format. The authors aim to “address the reliability and validity of the shortened version of the Arabic DLOQ and draw attention to the applicability of the learning organization concepts [...] in a Lebanese context” (pp. 320-330). Throughout the article, the authors prove their hypothesis and conclude with the assertion that the “study provides HR managers and HR practitioners, especially those in the Lebanese context, with a sound model for LO theory” (pp. 362-365). Equipped with the article and DLOQ, practitioners have a tool further validated for local assessment.

The final article outlining learning organization assessment tools focuses on [Marquardt's \(2011\)](#) five-component learning systems model. In "How Chief Learning Officers Build Learning Organizations," [Marquardt and Haight \(2018\)](#) apply Marquardt's tool in an assessment of 20 CLOs with the aim to understand how CLOs build learning organizations, determine how CLOs apply different factors of Marquardt's tools and uncover how CLOs lead the learning effort. Throughout the study, clear linkages to the model appear, which will aid other practitioners in model use. The study discovers that CLOs refer to three components of Marquardt's model frequently: learning, organization and people. This finding and Marquardt's tool in general can further aid practitioners in adding focus to a local assessment.

For more details on the Marsick and Watkin's DLOQ or Marquardt's learning systems model, practitioners can turn to the interview series by [Sidani and Reese \(2018\)](#). Previously in "A journey of collaborative learning organization research", the authors interviewed Marsick and Watkins. This article explores Marsick and Watkins' over three decades of collaborative work and design of the DLOQ. In this issue, [Sidani and Reese \(2018\)](#) interview Marquardt and further explore the foundation of his learning system model. In "A view of the learning organization from a practical perspective: interview with Michael Marquardt," [Sidani and Reese](#) explore the foundations of Marquardt's original research, the basis of his model and the areas of development since original introduction. For practitioners, this article aids in understanding the basis upon which the tool was created.

This issue of *The Learning Organization* is full of content to help practitioners think more deeply about assessing their organization. The case studies and empirical research can provide examples and ideas of how others have assessed themselves. Just as there may be no one clear definition of learning organizations, there are many evaluation tools to select from. Hopefully after reviewing the content in this issue, practitioners have a better understanding of how to proceed in answering the elusive question "Are we a learning organization?"

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Further reading

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