

# Learning-forgetting-unlearning-relearning – the learning organization’s learning dynamics

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## Introduction

Learning organizations are usually perceived as organizations that excel in individual and organizational learning, which renders them resilient to challenges both internally and externally. They are considered organizations that thrive on the synergy of individual and collective learning, which increases their transformation ability with the goal of sustained viability. However, a specific learning perspective cannot continue indefinitely. Learning organizations often face challenges requiring strategic discontinuities which call for collective reflection upon the suitability of organizational behavior followed by a critical thinking of the underlying knowledge base. In that process, practitioners often find that certain knowledge must be abandoned or discarded, redefined and modified, or updated with new information. This process exists on the individual, team and organizational level as every building block of a learning organization is continuously engaged in the learning-forgetting-unlearning-relearning dynamics. Even though much research attention has been dedicated to learning, other aspects of this learning dynamics have been relatively ignored in previous research. The majority of research in this direction can be traced to the period after the year 2000 (Azmi, 2008). This special issue is an attempt to amend this situation and provide guidelines for this complex learning dynamics that could be of use for practitioners.

## The mystery of unlearning

In their paper, Sharma and Lenka (2019) put emphasis on exploring the linkages between unlearning and relearning in organizations. When speaking of learning-forgetting-unlearning-relearning dynamics, it is a challenge to determine if these processes happen sequentially or simultaneously. For example, Turc and Baumard (2007) believe that unlearning and relearning occur sequentially in the way that unlearning triggers the process of relearning. When it comes to the desired outcome – new knowledge, Cegarra-Navarro *et al.* (2011) consider unlearning required for forgetting old knowledge followed by relearning and developing new knowledge. In addition, Cegarra-Navarro *et al.* (2014) consider the “unlearning context” in which forgetting-unlearning-relearning dynamics occurs. In that way, unlearning is often considered a prerequisite for effective relearning (Zhao *et al.*, 2013), which occurs through the process of forgetting or discarding the knowledge that has become obsolete or



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irrelevant in the newly emerged circumstance. It should be noted that unlearning should not always be followed by relearning if relearning is not considered necessary (Rupčić, 2017).

However, prior to identifying their dynamics, it is important to define the concepts in use. Organizational unlearning and relearning could be understood as a process of revisiting, revising, rewriting, updating, modifying, adapting and adjusting the existing knowledge in the light of new circumstances. They should be based on critical and systems thinking of these circumstances and their implications on the viability of a certain entity, in this case an organization. This process is subsequently followed by revisiting, revising, modifying, adapting and adjusting all organizational elements that are based on that knowledge such as structure, culture, policies, systems, processes that serve as drivers of certain organizational routines. It should be concluded that relearning encompasses both unlearning and discarding of organizational knowledge and learning or gaining new insight which contributes to changes in the organizational design. However, there are many nuances to organizational relearning. In case knowledge is refreshed and modified to a certain extent, relearning could be considered an attempt to reduce the possibility of knowledge loss due to forgetting and enhance the retention of knowledge in the human and organizational memory (Sharma and Lenka, 2019). It should be noted that here individual and organizational forgetting is considered a process that is not conscious or intentional.

Even though unlearning has been considered a conscious attempt followed by relearning, these processes also happen spontaneously, especially in individuals. Individuals could consciously try to unlearn certain knowledge or unintentionally forget certain knowledge or its parts that they have ceased to use at some point and never revise it again, but they could also try to retrieve that knowledge or some of its parts at a later stage and engage in the process of relearning. That process could be spontaneous on the part of individuals, but its effects could provoke a snowball effect at the organizational level so that the whole process of unlearning and relearning commences consciously and collectively. Forgetting is useful as it enables the reduction of the influence of old knowledge on cognitive and behavioral processes (Grisold *et al.*, 2017). However, conscious forgetting or unlearning contributes to more permanent changes in the individual and organizational memory because it is supported by awareness of the reasons behind such decisions. It is therefore not surprising that forgetting has been found to have a negative effect on radical innovation, whereas unlearning was found to support it (Yang *et al.*, 2014) due to the fact that unlearning is a conscious effort aimed at abandoning not only certain knowledge and behavior based on that knowledge but also values that support it (Hislop *et al.*, 2014).

Sharma and Lenka (2019) apostrophize that unlearning and relearning do not have to be related in terms of occurring consequentially. Unlearning could start by identifying that something is not quite right or that something is wrong and that action needs to be taken. In that way, unlearning starts by asking questions regarding certain activities or routines and the dominant logic or the mental model behind them. Questioning of the dominant logic entails questioning of the knowledge base behind these activities or organizational routines. In case the dominant logic is considered partially or completely wrong, beliefs or the value systems behind it are also questioned and critically examined. It is evident that this process could occur at the individual level, especially at the level of the empowered and self-organized individuals, at the team level, especially in self-organized cross-functional teams and at the organizational level, which then could lead to questioning of the organizational mission or reason for its existence. In case significant changes to the dominant logic or the mental model should be made, unlearning is followed by new learning and not relearning in which entirely new knowledge perspective is chosen based on necessary shifts and transformations.

Before concluding that something in terms of certain routines needs to change, it should first be identified which knowledge lies behind it. Then, individuals, teams or organizations

make a decision regarding which knowledge should be discarded. The outcome of unlearning is then the act of conscious and deliberate discarding of the knowledge that could no longer be of use. The question is what happens with that knowledge. It could either be intentionally erased from the organizational memory or displaced to a location from which it could be retrieved but is no longer considered active knowledge in use. In times of rapid changes one could never be adamant that some knowledge would never be useful again. While erasing or displacing organizational knowledge might be easy, individuals should put in an extra effort to not let their behavior be influenced by the knowledge previously considered relevant.

Now the new learning can begin. The process of learning and replacing certain knowledge is often supported by a period of experimentation until the new forms of knowledge and knowledge-based routines are found that are considered suitable in a particular situation. This process could be iterative and based on collected feedback. It is expected that individuals go through the process of adjustments until the new knowledge becomes used by rote in newly established routines. The organization, as a collective of individuals, also goes through the period of adjustment or reinforcement until the new knowledge is considered fully in use and mistakes and omissions are no longer made. That is the time when permanent change in behavior has occurred as a result of new practice and it could be stated that learning has occurred successfully (Morgan *et al.*, 1993).

### **Deliberate leap into the unknown**

If the outcome of unlearning is conscious and deliberate discarding of the knowledge that is no longer of use, the question is does the process start with or without a predetermined goal. Peschl (2019) suggests that the idea that the process of learning starts with a predetermined goal should be challenged and he developed a future-oriented model of learning based on this assumption. Environmental complexity and ambiguity causing inability to determine future trends renders predictions regarding specific knowledge acquisitions and learning perspective almost impossible. That is why Peschl (2019) addressed the gap of unlearning in an open-ended future and further unfolding in uncertainty and ambiguity. As the future direction is not perfectly clear, it is possible that the process of challenging dominant logic, frames of reference and mental models is difficult, abundant in resistance and anxiety, especially when the desired solution is not known in advance and is subject of debate amongst interest groups with conflicting goals, interests and ideas.

Unlearning is always a point of departure from the known into the partially or completely unknown, which is a cause of insecurity. However, if the leap into the unknown is made in a learning organization, organizational members could count on mutual support and ongoing dialogue as a process in which interpretation occurs collectively, followed by a joint exploration of newly needed knowledge. In addition, whenever necessary, organizational members of a learning organization are open to inaction (Vince, 2008) when matters are individually and collectively reflected upon, new questions are asked and not immediately answered, new perspectives are brought to surface and new patterns of thinking emerge. This period of inaction is one of the key strengths and sources of power of a learning organization (Brook *et al.*, 2016).

Unlearning in a learning organization could therefore be understood as a process of deep and collective understanding of the existing knowledge in light of current circumstances and the joint and collective quest for new knowledge. That is why Peschl (2019) calls it an adaptive process “where old and new knowledge interact with each other in the process of mutual fade-out and fade-in” (p. 459). It is not a one-time process of problem-solving, but a continuous quest for meaning based on the awaken sensitivity for emerging realities that could be in the realm of potential or soon manifested reality, without engaging in any form of control or evident inclination. It is the process of discovering the new reality but also

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co-creating it by engaging in its formation by being attracted to some of its emerging features. In this regard, it should be noted that the process of unlearning could prove to be significantly different in learning organizations compared to organizations of a more classical setup. Future empirical research is yet to confirm this hypothesis.

### Evidence of previous research

Previous research by [Cegarra-Navarro et al. \(2016\)](#) found that the context of organizational unlearning mediates the effects of the exploration and exploitation of knowledge on organizational performance, which calls for further studies of this complex process. In addition, their study has shown that nourishing the unlearning context, which is followed by knowledge updates or relearning, is crucial in small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) when implementing work-life balance. The reason could be found in the importance of work-life balance in innovation for which outdated or unnecessary knowledge can become an obstacle. Organizational forgetting was also found to be a critical determinant of innovation performance as found by [Huang et al. \(2018\)](#). It is also logical that the study by [Wong et al. \(2018\)](#) found that unlearning is positively related with organizational readiness, which is a prerequisite for further development and innovation.

However, it is important to advance studies regarding factors that could facilitate unlearning and relearning. For instance, [Usman et al. \(2018\)](#) found that ethical leadership characterized by honesty and accountability facilitate unlearning of destructive and inappropriate behaviors and practices in individuals. It is expected that transformative leadership would be found to be a strong facilitator of the unlearning process followed by relearning. It is also expected that unlearning would be found crucial for double-loop organizational learning. Further studies of these interactions would require different methodological approaches. For that purpose, [Kluge et al. \(2019\)](#) present suggestions regarding application of a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods in future studies.

### Unlearning and forgetting in practice

Unlearning has been explained as a complex and conscious process that consists of many layers and results in discarding of certain knowledge and building up of another. However, it is not surprising that practitioners would use the term “forgetting” when consciously making a decision to discard some knowledge or its manifestation in terms of a routine. “Forgetting” is simply a more appealing and clearer term to people than unlearning. Some scholars also use the term unlearning and refer to it as intentional forgetting ([Klammer and Gueldenberg, 2019](#); [Tsang, 2017](#)) and by which certain routines could be either replaced by new ones in the process of substitution or simply discarded as irrelevant without substitution of any sort ([Tsang and Zahra, 2008](#)).

In his paper in this special issue, [Volland \(2019\)](#) deals with the process of intentional forgetting and substitution of rules in a study conducted in a multinational car manufacturing company that had established time-limited agile projects. Rules are simple and clear routines that are “repetitive, recognizable patterns of independent actions, carried out by multiple actors” ([Feldman and Pentland, 2003](#), pp. 94-118). Rules have two distinct characteristics: they are usually imposed by power (authority) and are normative in nature (they define *how* something *should* be done) ([Ortmann, 2010](#)). However, besides being enforced, rules can also be created by self-organization of empowered individuals in the process of collective negotiations and collective decision. These rules should not be considered as imposed or enforced but voluntary actions of individuals based on their consensus regarding the appropriateness of the chosen actions.

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Volland (2019) conducted his research as a single case study of a car manufacturer that introduced agile projects with a fixed set of rules that relied on self-organization. However, project members still applied some of the rules that were familiar to them from conventional working practices regarding project management. By examining the case study, the author found that if the rules are created by domination and do not originate from conventional working practices, they will likely be intentionally forgotten. The substituting rules could then be designed by self-organization. However, in that process, project members surprisingly resorted to rules familiar to them from conventional working practices of project management instead of creating new ones. However, the rules established by self-organization were not substituted or changed throughout the duration of the project. In that way, the previous finding by Ostrom (2000) that self-organized rules are more sustainable than those imposed by domination was also confirmed by this research. This case study shows that through self-organization organizational members change the rules they consider “coercive and not enabling”, or in other words engage in organizational forgetting by using collective power despite the fact that they then often resort to conventional working practices.

Krauss (2019) considered the process of unlearning in the art organizational processes. The findings are based on her experience in the art organization Site for Unlearning as an experimental art project and a gathering that had the purpose to unlearn something collaboratively. The learning-unlearning adventure was based on the premise of the “situated knowledge” by Haraway (1988) or the knowledge (theories, ideas and practices) that is constructed or produced within specific situations that are determined by historical, political, socio-cultural and economic factors. Certain knowledge is then embodied in “institutional habits” or routines, often in the realm of the unconscious, which leads to the logical question:

Q1. How could routines which undermine organizational purpose be unlearned?

In the artistic organizations, it is especially useful to harness the potential of imagination of their members as a means of “short-circuiting” institutional routines or habits (Spivak, 2012) but also as the *modus operandi* of unlearning and relearning. Artists are prone to imagination by nature and this inclination could be a major driver for unlearning and relearning. By engaging in collective activities or various sorts (Krauss, 2019 for suggestions), organizational members could engage in imagination and discovering or rediscovering of their passions and their relation to institutional routines, which could then be identified as facilitators or obstacles. Determination of the essence of institutional routines and their relation to personal truths and missions, especially for newcomers, then becomes the practice of relating to others and to the institution in general, resulting in a strong organizational relationship capital, which is an important leverage in organizational transformation. In that process, not only unfavourable institutional routines could be identified, discarded and replaced but also better relations could be formed leading to a greater level of identification with the organization’s mission in accordance with the personal passion and mission. That again is at the heart of a true learning organization.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it would be useful to cite the definition by Sharma and Lenka (2019) who state that:

Relearning is a process that involves challenging the status quo of an organization and gaining new insights about the contemporaneous subject matter (either knowledge, routine, or values) which requires possible renewal due to changes in internal mode of operations or external environment (p. 510).

This definition accentuates the importance of critical thinking and interpretative ability of the involved stakeholders. The greater the ability of interpretative critical thinking, the faster

is the process of unlearning and relearning. As this ability could be attributed only to individuals, the problem of collectively reaching a consensus regarding the interpretation of a new reality and developing an understanding regarding the direction of future actions and consequent knowledge acquisition is very much pronounced. The process should therefore not be understood as linear because many iterations of dialogue could occur before consensus is made regarding what needs to be unlearned, how and in which direction should new learning proceed. That is the case also in organizations in which employee input is not solicited and the decision of unlearning is made by management. If management consists of a system of people, the process could be iterative as well. In addition, several iterations of critical thinking and interpretation could occur before an understanding is reached by management about the process of knowledge modification and future learning. If examined in dynamic industries and markets, the iterations of unlearning and relearning occur continuously, often seemingly chaotically and continuously remain in the state of easily disturbed dynamic equilibrium.

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