

Unlearning and the learning organization: revisited and expanded

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This issue of *The Learning Organization* journal returns to the topic of unlearning within the organization. A little over a year ago, in issue 24:1 of *The Learning Organization*, the journal last stressed unlearning as a critical component to the learning journey. In that issue, the Implication for Practitioners section outlined the phases of unlearning drawing upon articles from Foil and O'Connor, Starbuck and Visser. Looking back at the [Foil and O'Connor's \(2017\)](#) article, the three phases of unlearning as described by the authors were destabilizing, discarding and experimenting or developing new understandings. In this issue, none of the prior content is challenged. Rather, the authors in this issue expand on some key points in the unlearning discussion with focus on internal barriers, external barriers, the impact of the manager and use of technology.

For practitioners, the unlearning topic remains relevant as the unlearning of existing practices, knowledge or beliefs creates a path for new ways of doing business, which seems of continual importance to an ever-changing business environment. This issue contains an outstanding example of such a case. [Snihur's \(2018\)](#) article, entitled "Responding to business model innovation: organizational unlearning and firm failure", provides a lucid depiction of Borders' response to Amazon's entry into the bookselling industry. The case study tells the short two-decade story of Borders from a successful Kmart spin-off to eventual bankruptcy. Snihur follows [Starbuck's \(2017\)](#) model and combines the events of the Borders' case into each of Starbucks phases: weathering the storm, denial, unlearning and eventually failure.

For practitioners, this case study exemplifies a familiar situation. But, more notably, the author offers three organization identity change tactics for practitioners to avert a similar scenario. As delineated in the table below, the author ties the failure to the organization's top managers' inability to orchestrate organizational identity change when threatened with a business model innovation ([Table I](#)).

Snihur evaluates the organizations' inability to unlearn and adapt from an organization identity perspective (internal elements), whereas [Becker \(2018\)](#) analyzes organizational unlearning from an external perspective through assessing the impact of professional identity. Becker's assessment is of particular importance to the practitioner as professionalization continues to grow and employee career tenor reduces. Gone are the days of long-term career development within one organization. Certain organizations in specific industries find themselves with a fragmented professional workforce that identifies with varying external groups that often counter the organization's identity. Becker offers considerations to facilitate unlearning under tensions of conflicting external and internal identities.



Becker outlines the structure and attitudinal and social elements of a profession to assist the practitioner in understanding the forces opposing unlearning within the organization. Examples within the article explain how the forces counter during unlearning. Through understanding the countering forces, the practitioner can better understand possible hindrances to the unlearning process.

Casey *et al.* (2018) view the unlearning concept from the context of forgetting and focus on the managers' influence. The authors define organizational forgetting as "the loss, voluntary or otherwise of organizational knowledge". The authors aim to offer guidance for managers who look to diminish the disruptive impact of unintentional forgetting or promote the speed of intentional forgetting on the learning process. Their table offers an outstanding summary of previous studies on the topic. Additionally, for practitioners, the table provides a clear guide on steps managers can take to prevent accidental or promote intentional forgetting. For practitioners, the table is invaluable, as well as a great summary of the entire article.

Filstad *et al.* (2018) review the benefit of enterprise social media (ESM) on knowledge and power boundaries. For those unfamiliar with ESM, think of the dramatic growth and implementation of blogs or other social software platforms as learning tools. The authors evaluate the impact of knowledge transferring, translating and transforming through ESMs. They explain that ESM is primarily useful for transferring of explicit information and not directly supportive of translating and transforming. Also, within this research paper, the authors uncover the importance of the middle managers in utilizing the new tools and sharing the vision, which can create a positive or detrimental impact to crossing boundaries. In the research, middle managers show a negative impact. Another finding of the paper is that power boundaries increase as employees comment and contradict senior management viewpoints. However, the interaction falls short of creating anything more than discussion and never reach learning significance. For practitioners, the key opportunities for success with an ESM is in the alignment toward using the ESM in transferring, translating and transforming. The tools can be valuable, however, as the research paper indicates, only with oversight to ensure other issues such as trust remain resilient to the organization.

Also in this issue, readers will find an interview article with Dr Victoria Marsick and Dr Karen Watkins as Sidani and Reese (2018) delve into the discussion with thought leaders spanning over three decades in the field. The interview article is particularly important to practitioners because the interviewees describe their background and the genesis of the dimension of the learning organization model. For a practitioner, understanding and implementing the model into one's organization provides priceless knowledge of the organization's culture and learning mindset. For anyone interested in understanding the origin of oft-used learning organization theories, the Dr Marsick and Dr Watkins interview provides a superlative review.

Develop a broader and more malleable organizational identity
Manage and experiment with several business models
Significantly increase the diversity of top executive backgrounds

Borders' identity was focused on brick-and-mortar store retail concepts, not on-line retail
Borders held a Web presence but only through outsourcing of expertise to on-line retailers
Borders maintained a management team from the traditional retail space and not on-line

Table I.
Tactics to unlearn
and adapt more
quickly

Source: Snihur (2018)

For practitioners interested in the linkage of learning and innovation, Tjønndal (2018) provides a book review of *From Knowledge Management to Learning Organization to Innovation*. The review outlines the intricate linkage between learning and innovation. Ultimately, the book aims to explain the knowledge that leads to innovation via learning practices. The book review provides readers a quick summary of this compilation from 15 authors.

Finally, the editor-in-chief of *The Learning Organization* offers an answer to “what is the learning organization, what does it mean?”. Örtenblad (2018) begins with three approaches to define the concept of “learning organization”. Then, he offers four versions of the learning organization definition, which then leads to creation of suggested demarcation lines for what is and is not a learning organization. In his suggested demarcation lines, Örtenblad appeals for more research to build upon conceptual models that he suggests, or conversely, he invites others to continue the debate in the event of disagreement. Ultimately in concluding, he suggests more debate and open discussion on the questions “what is the learning organization, what does it mean?”. Örtenblad (2018). The ultimate opportunity lies with the practitioner. Consider your personal situation, your learning organization, and consider how you join the discussion. The linkage of theory and practice is never an easy task. But, without one-another, the results in an ever-changing environment can be catastrophic. Do not let your organization fall to the wayside as it remains resolute in current practices and oblivious to the ever-changing environment. Do not be the next Borders.

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