

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The practitioner's steps in making the learning organizational adaptive to the environment

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As the business environment continues to hasten in pace towards hyper competition and continued change, an organizations ability to gather data, gain insight and adapt at all levels as an innate, mundane and daily activity continues to heighten in importance. For practitioners, the future becomes less a drawn out conclusion written in a strategic plan and more an agile daily journey built upon sound learning practices. However, learning principles themselves are not always clear. There are no “one size fit all” solutions to creating a learning organization. This issue of *The Learning Organization* uncovers elements of the learning organization that are not always elicited. Some of the principles within the articles are seldom discussed and others are frequently discussed but in varying contexts.

Concepts such as improvisation and interests are described as influences to the learning organization that are not always embraced in the discussion. Improvisation, for example, may typically be viewed as a failure of control and impediment to learning; however, within this issue, readers will uncover how improvisation can positively impact the learning organization and why improvisation should be embraced. It is improvisation that allows the learning to adjust with the environment. Similarly, readers will better understand the impact of interests in the learning process. It is the competing interests that drive learning in one direction or another. Readers will discover how interests impact the learning organization positively or negatively. These are just two examples from articles within this issue that illustrate areas within the learning organization discussion that need clarity in practice.

Throughout the issues, there are many more concepts and ideas that can help practitioners better understand how to set out on a learning journey that is flexible enough to meet the ever-changing environment.

In the first article of the issue, Cunha and Clegg (2019), in “Improvisation in the learning organization: a defense of the infra-ordinary”, present the concept of improvisation, as they set out to ask, “how and why is improvisation hidden in the learning organization” (pp. 238-251). The authors posit that the characteristics of improvisation as non-linear and seemingly irrational have led to limited consideration of the concept in the more structured learning organization discourse. Although the improvisational concept may be void in the learning organization discussion, the author provides reasons that “improvisation is often covered in a cloak of invisibility” and eminent in the underlying mundane and infra-ordinary influences when organizing around learning (pp. 238-251). It is in this infra-ordinary concept and the daily mundane that practitioners can contemplate how to best



integrate improvisation. However, first, the authors outline two ways that improvisation contributes to learning.

To apply Cunha and Clegg's (2019) concept in practice, Table I offers great clarity in two distinctly different improvisations: convergent and divergent. With an understanding of the two improvisational methods and where those may manifest themselves, practitioners can begin to understand more about how the impromptu actions lead to generating learning. In addition, it is in this *ad hoc* action, reflection and learning that improvisation finds itself part of the messy, non-linear process of learning within the organization. And, as Cunha and Clegg (2019) surmise, with the failures of organizations to adapt in increasingly dynamic environments, "for the agile organization, therefore, managing more means controlling less. When improvisations are assumed as infra-ordinary there is no point in controlling them." (pp. 238-251). For practitioners the acceptance of improvisation at the infra-ordinary level may become the answer to agility.

To characterize another theme not often discussed overtly in the learning organization literature, Field (2019) in his article, "Habermas, interests and organizational learning: a critical perspective", uncovers the often implied impact of interest and more directly the often overlooked role of conflict of interests in learning. Field (2019) highlights how the unitary perspective of interests pervades the learning organization literature and describes the implied assumptions that the organization acts to consolidate learning around its interests. He counters with the pluralist perspective of organizational learning and describes the lesser extent to which this viewpoint is embraced as a learning catalysts. In his paper, questions are raised about the extent to which organization learning not only results from aligned interests (aforementioned unitary) but also from conflicts between interests of an organization and its members (pluralist).

Field (2019) uses Habermas' conceptualization of knowledge and interests to guide the discussion. Reference his Figure 1 for more clarity. Field (2019) clearly explains how the technical interest of money and power, which are most likely linked to unitary perspectives around which the organization can coalesce, are the interests prevalent in learning. These interests, as he explains, are not always aligned with the lifeworld interests, which more closely align with the pluralist perspective. It is this tension upon which learning can expand. In addition, for the practitioner, it is here that the application can occur. It is the practitioners' decision how the conflict is viewed. If the tension is eradicated, technical interests (money and power) typically dominate at the detriment of the lifeworld. Therefore, the proposed step is to embrace tension and disconnect as methods of learning. For the practitioner the answer may be to learn to not eliminate conflicting interest and to better understand that interests and tension thereof to drive learning and success. Conversely, if the tension is removed it usual goes at the expense of the lifeworld. In addition, without the lifeworld, differing and evolving perspectives will flow less freely into the organization.

Asher and Popper (2019) in their article "Tacit knowledge as a multilayer phenomenon: the onion model" set out to operationalize the study of tacit knowledge. Alternatively, as they describe their ambition in the paper, "provide a conceptual framework that can be used for research and diagnosis aimed at exploring tacit knowledge" (pp. 264-275). Their work is truly a piece that can be immediately implemented in a practical setting. The authors outline their three layers of tacit knowledge as the layers of the onion. These three layers differ in their characterization, which result in different practical applications and approaches to extract (or make elicit for the organization). It is in their description of the three layers and methods upon which to discuss the layers that the authors offer the best practical advice.

Upon completing this article, readers will immediately recognize the different characteristics of HPK (hidden practical knowledge), RTK (reflective tacit knowledge) and DTK (demonstrative tacit knowledge). In addition, armed with the article, leaders can quickly frame questions or interactions in a way to draw the tacit knowledge to the surface. As the authors conclude, “the onion model offers a less typological and more integrative way to examine the term tacit knowledge” (pp. 264-275). For the practitioner, the onion model offers a useful tool to explore tacit knowledge and expand learning.

In a broader learning focus, Brix and Peronard create a wider view of learning elements with a narrower context. If you operate in an interorganizational environment, [Brix and Peronard's \(2019\)](#) article “Organizing for interorganizational learning in a service networks” provides you an immediately understanding of learning within the multi-organizational context. The authors consolidate the literature of service networks and integrate with an interorganizational learning framework through use of the service triangle. The authors focus upon service networks because as they state service networks are, “an emerging phenomenon that is gaining academic attention” (pp. 276-288). In addition, with the complexities of interactive learning across a network reliant upon a consistent service experience all the way to the customer, the authors make a clear case for the importance of interorganizational learning for the service network. Their linkage with the service triangle (Figure 1) creates a clear three-activity approach to facilitating strong interorganizational learning.

For the practitioner, the authors summarize the benefits as “the study identifies key barriers and opportunities to interorganizational learning that exist in the new “context of learning” (pp. 319-322). The authors’ identification of the barriers and opportunities are the most useful for leaders because they clarify steps to take and avoid as one manages the service offer complexities across organizations and retains consistencies in the eyes’ of the customers.

For practical application in knowledge-based companies, [Farzaneh et al. \(2019\)](#) in their article “Moderating role of innovative culture in the relationship between organizational learning and innovation performance” provide an empirical study within the pharmaceutical industry. The authors aim to explain, “how innovation performance can be improved when innovative culture is and organization learning are simultaneously fostered” (pp. 289-303). The study utilizes a survey with 68 companies within the pharmaceutical industry as they aim to test hypothesizes around organizational learning, innovation culture and innovation performance. Figure 1 in the article provides the research model and the article defines each hypothesis with great clarity, which is extremely useful for practical application.

Within the discussion, the authors provide the best insights for practical applications. The study clearly outlines the importance of organizational learning on product and process innovation, the positive associations between innovative culture and produce and process innovation, and the moderating impact of innovation culture between organizational learning and innovation. For a practitioner, the findings are clear. Innovative culture in conjunction with organizational learning creates steps toward improved product and process innovation. In addition, in a fast-paced world of knowledge-based companies, the ability to innovate and create drives the foundation to continued success.

In the final article of this issue, [Antonacopoulou et al. \(2019\)](#) provide Part 1 of theoretical study in an effort to keep the learning organization idea alive. The New Learning Organisation: PART I – Institutional Reflexivity, High Agility Organising and Learning Leadership, builds upon Sensuous Learning, which as they describe, originates from GNOSIS 2020 Network. As they state, the article “proposes three principles and practices:

Institutional Reflexivity, High Agility Organizing and Learning Leadership” (pp. 304-318). It is the definition of these three principles that help practitioners make the linkage to enabling learning with a difference and as they describe, “what lies in the space-in-between loops of learning” (pp. 304-318). In addition, although the article is heavily weighted in theoretical discussion, there are practical application ideas scattered throughout. Ultimately, central to the paper is how Sensuous Learning promotes commitment to the New Learning Organization. In addition, understanding the actions behind the three principles is applicable for any practitioner.

This issue of the learning organization is full of content to help practitioners think more deeply about the less clearly defined or the seldom-discussed elements of the learning organization. The articles within this issue provide lucidity in how the ever-changing environment influences the organization and how practitioners can contemplate more broadly about designing an agile future situated for success and guided by learning.

References

- Antonacopoulou, E., Moldjord, C., Steiro, T. and Stokkeland, C. (2019), “The new learning organization: part 1 – institutional reflexivity, high agility organizing and learning leadership”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 304-318.
- Asher, D. and Popper, M. (2019), “Tacit knowledge as a multilayer phenomenon: the onion model”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 264-275.
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- Farzaneh, M., Ghasemzadeh, P., Mehralian, G. and Nazari, J. (2019), “Moderating role of innovation culture in the relationship between organizational learning and innovative performance”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 289-303.
- Field, L. (2019), “Habermas, interests and organizational learning: a critical perspective”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 252-263.

Further reading

- Clegg, S. and Cunha, M. (2019), “Improvisation in the learning organization: a defense of the infra-ordinary”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 238-251.

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