

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

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Balancing power, learning and change in learning organizations

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Introduction

In this issue, we explore the question of how power, learning and organizational change and transformation can be reconciled to achieve optimal outcomes. Normally, we assume that learning occurs naturally and that whatever is useful is integrated into organizational activities. However, this is often not the case, as learning and the use of acquired knowledge is influenced by power dynamics in the organization, which was addressed by [Nakanishi \(2022\)](#). This shows us that while organizations can and do engage in organizational learning, they do not have to be learning organizations, especially considering [Senge's \(1990\)](#) conceptualization. [Fimnestrand \(2023\)](#) was also on the same track and offered a solution in terms of Nordic management. Even if the interests of the main stakeholders – managers and employees – do not always coincide, democratic dialog is very much practiced in these countries, leading to collective sense-making and co-generative learning.

Learning is critical to organizational change and transformation, and this was addressed by [Andres & Heo \(2023\)](#). In the face of adverse circumstances, but also in normal situations, practitioners should practice agile and contextual learning as well as transformational learning. Transformational learning can be stimulated by transformational leadership, which [Hariharan & Anand \(2023\)](#) explored in terms of learning flows, particularly feed-forward learning flows that introduce new learning and ideas. In some systems, such as libraries, order is a much more desirable state, especially when it is culturally driven, which was addressed by [Tran \(2023\)](#). A bureaucratic culture should not prevail in health care and should instead give way to ambidexterity or exploration and use of new knowledge, which was addressed by [Kuntz, Wong & Budge \(2023\)](#). However, it seems that health-care organizations are still far from the state of free and open dialog with all stakeholders.

Leaning and organizational power dynamics

Many papers emphasize the importance of learning in organizations at all levels – individual, team and organizational. However, learning initiatives are assumed to arise spontaneously, and learning opportunities are distributed evenly throughout the organization to all interested parties. It is also assumed that all useful knowledge is fully integrated into organizational routines through organizational learning, change and transformation. However, according to the behavioral approach, the firm is not a unified entity, but a series of changing coalitions among individuals and groups, all of which may



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pursue their own goals. This means that shifting power dynamics can significantly affect learning and knowledge sharing and implementation. Goals are also not always rationally determined but are the result of a political negotiation process between influential parties. If learning organizations are not composed of mature and constructive individuals, the same thing can happen to them despite the best intentions of other organizational members. In other words, learning and organizational learning can be politicized (Dekker & Hansén, 2004) and do not always lead to intelligent behavior (Levitt & March, 1988) and may even be misguided and undesirable, at least for some internal and external stakeholders.

In this context, Nakanishi (2022) examined the mechanisms of politics of organizational learning with an emphasis on the interpretation of knowledge as a key process of organizational learning that leads to further organizational change and development. Knowledge that is accepted as valid and useful is legitimized and further implemented (Burgoyne & Jackson, 1997). However, as Nakanishi (2022) suggests, knowledge should be legitimized in the initial stages of organizational learning and knowledge management – the interpretation stage. Huber (1991) explains organizational learning as a knowledge management process that includes the acquisition of knowledge, the distribution of information, the interpretation of information and the development of organizational memory. Although all phases are important, information interpretation is the key to further information implementation and change. In this regard, the entire organization can be viewed as an interpretive system (Daft & Weick, 1984) that emerges through collective sense-making by its members until consensus is reached, or, following the behavioral approach to the firm, key individuals and groups or shifting power coalitions can be viewed as organizational interpretive prisms such that knowledge is legitimized without broader organizational consensus.

Organizations have already been viewed as arenas of self-interested actors governed by power dynamics that induce others to accept certain information, goals and actions that are wholly or partially incompatible with their will and interests (Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, & Kleysen, 2005). Other organizational members might be coerced into accepting certain ideas, activities or goals, or they might be dominated and manipulated into doing so by influencing their perceptions and behaviors. Such behaviors are at odds with the ideas of the learning organization, especially considering the concept of the learning organization by Senge (1990, p. 3), who defines a learning organization as one:

[...] where people continuously increase their ability to create the results they truly desire, where new and evolving thinking patterns are nurtured, where collective aspiration is unleashed and where people continuously learn how to learn together.

While it is highly unlikely that there are many such organizations whose members could describe their engagement in their organization in this way, it is certain that many organizations change through the integration of acquired and interpreted knowledge, even if it comes from a group of dominant individuals. In this way, an organization can engage in organizational learning even if it cannot be described as a learning organization, especially given Senge's ideas. On the other hand, sometimes the members of an organization can reach a consensus on what "they truly desire," but some other activities or behaviors should be adopted due to pressure from some external stakeholders such as customers or distributors, or due to regulations. Thus, information and knowledge can be legitimized by external stakeholders and enforced internally if organizational members legitimize them in their own change processes. The dynamics of this political process are therefore of great importance when considering organizational learning and change.

In his paper, [Nakanishi \(2022\)](#) explored the concept of legitimacy in institutional theory, which is concerned with the reasons for and modalities of organizational adoption of new practices in pursuit of legitimacy ([Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017](#)). Organizational and legitimacy theory thus share the same goal-organizational change through knowledge legitimacy. However, the key question is: legitimacy by *whom*? This question becomes even more important when considering the definition of legitimacy as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Actions is a common term that can also refer to various routines, as well as policies, rules and procedures. This means that the prevailing value system, more specifically mental models or accepted narratives, guides not only behavior but also the interpretation process of new information and serves as perceptual and cognitive filters.

[Nakanishi \(2022\)](#) used the “narrative review” method and conducted “qualitative discussions” ([Post, Sarala, Gatrell, & Prescott, 2020](#)) to introduce the politics-based model of knowledge legitimation, focusing on the interpretation of new knowledge. The author identified the following elements that determine organizational power politics: estimated practical benefits and costs; reliability, validity and urgency of knowledge; compatibility with existing templates; beliefs and interests of influential stakeholders; and external legitimacy. These factors also affect learning. For example, if a particular learning is seen as beneficial, compatible with existing beliefs, reliable, urgent and beneficial to some actors, greater power will be exerted to adopt it. The costs of learning have an opposite influence and will hinder certain learning processes. However, if only one or some groups could benefit, a conflict of interest could arise. In this way, incentives to pursue and legitimize learning can be twofold: organizational or individual benefits, although individual can also refer to specific organizational groups. A group could be a department or business unit that has a conflict of interest with other departments or business units regarding the adoption of a particular policy, technology, management methods, etc. Power conflicts could arise, and the more powerful party could prevail so that the new approach is not adopted. This could happen through some more or less desirable approaches. For example, organizational members may influence others and persuade them to discuss and then adopt the legitimacy of a particular body of knowledge. Some actors may resort to manipulation and try to change the perceptions and behavior of others. Actors may also resort to discipline, coercion and dominance to force others to accept certain actions and ignore their own arguments. In extreme cases, opponents are even eliminated.

[Nakanishi \(2022\)](#) has noted that this use of power inhibits, hinders or at least impairs genuine learning. Although the statement “knowledge is power” reaches its full potential in this discussion, it should be noted that these power dynamics and the resulting behaviors run counter to the philosophy of the learning organization and that all such manifestations should be identified and eliminated immediately through open dialog.

Do Nordic countries do things differently?

In this issue, [Finnestrand \(2023\)](#) also addresses the distribution of power in organizations. As noted earlier, managers (employers) and organizational members (employees) are very unlikely to have the same interests, leading to organizational harmony and total trust, as advocated by the unitarist perspective. Conflicts of interest, at least occasionally, are more likely and represent the reality of most organizations as described by the pluralist perspective. Although it is good to have a common vision and consensus on organizational goals and issues, as [Senge \(1990\)](#) suggests, this is very rare. Power dynamics play an

important role in organizations that are working to improve their organizational learning and perhaps even become learning organizations. However, this has been largely neglected in the field of learning organizations (Coopey, 1995), leading to the impression that power in learning organizations must be evenly distributed, when in fact this is an idea that is difficult to achieve, especially in large organizations. Even in organizations that want to become learning organizations, full democratization, participation and emancipation of employees is rare. This is also one of the reasons why learning organizations are constantly evolving in this direction, while the state of the learning organization is a goal that can never be fully achieved.

Finnestrand (2023), however, notes that there may be a “third way” combining both the pluralist and unitarist perspectives that can be observed in union–management relations in the Nordic countries. Although the conflict between capital and labor is recognized in this region, cooperation based on collective rationality is sought and often achieved. Under conditions of rapid change, both parties are united through the process of learning with the goal of advancing organizational development and achieving benefits for all. Organizations in the Nordic countries thrive through democratic dialog and co-generative learning (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). Every work process changes rapidly, so learning at lower levels is a continuous and interactive process that is mostly practice- and problem-oriented (Molleman & Broekhuis, 2001). A certain amount of freedom is necessary to build trust and enable collaborative learning. Most learning processes work like a PDCA cycle. First, actions are planned, then things are done, and then reviewed and reflected on together, which is a learning process that leads to new ideas and further planning and action. In this way, organizational development becomes a learning process based on wide collective reflection.

External experts are often brought in during this process, but projects have often not been “self-propelling” (Sitter, Hertog, & Dankbaar, 1997, p. 499). Insiders prove to be much more important for organizational learning and change. Together with external experts, they can initiate the process of developing co-generative learning by clearly defining the problem through dialog. The final solution depends on the problem definition. This process also builds trust and teaches the parties how to collaborate and learn. Insiders are very important because they have contextual knowledge. An understanding of the problem and the desired outcome should be achieved through dialog to provide a solid foundation for subsequent interactions, learning and reflection. Insiders can also be successful without outside experts, perhaps enlisting the help of a “friendly outsider” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) who can help participants see the big picture, recognize problems and their implications and identify difficult areas that are often neglected, overlooked or simply avoided. All of this is important for successful collective and co-generative learning.

Role of learning and knowledge in organizational transformation

Learning is the process that connects all organizational stakeholders in all interactions. However, it is particularly interesting to examine the role of learning in crises and organizational transformation, which was addressed by Andres and Heo (2023). Knowledge, especially specific knowledge, can be considered a strategic asset. Andres and Heo (2023) wanted to examine how organizations learn in crisis and from crisis to ensure their survival, but also transformation if necessary. A crisis may be small in scale and predictable, or a sudden and unforeseen event that leaves little or no room for planning. A crisis of smaller magnitude may threaten an aspect of value creation that could be changed through single-loop learning, or it may be unexpected and massive, threatening the viability and legitimacy of the organization. Its causes and manifestations may be entirely clear or uncertain and

ambiguous, leading to equally predictable implications and consequences, making the crisis a major disruptive event.

Few crisis events allow sufficient time for thorough planning and action plans. Most require a rapid response, so time for learning and knowledge consolidation may also be limited. The knowledge and understanding required to respond to a crisis may also be unknown or not clearly identified. Crises may be broader in nature and therefore entail new regulation that could either complicate existing problems or make them less pronounced and threatening. For this reason, no clear guidelines could be identified for managing a specific crisis and change, particularly at the onset of crisis manifestation. However, it could be suggested that:

- managers and organizational members apply systems thinking when assessing the crisis;
- become aware of the nature of the crisis as soon as possible and gather all possible information;
- engage in collective sense-making to understand the nature of the crisis and its impact;
- learn about possible solutions as a team and with other stakeholders, especially external value creation and distribution partners;
- engage in dialog to develop the most appropriate response to the crisis situation; and
- continuously provide support and ensure a culture of connectedness, dialog, information and knowledge sharing, learning from mistakes and from each other, and experimenting together.

It is well-known that learning organizations, or organizations that aspire to become learning organizations, evaluate, rethink and redesign their general assumptions or mental models to fit current circumstances. However, if a crisis situation occurs unexpectedly, this discipline may prove to be an obstacle in learning how to manage the crisis and lead to change and a new state of existence. In other words, organizational members may be committed to these principles, values and beliefs, so that they filter new information through this lens and do not consider the possibility that other perspectives may be a possible solution to new problems, resulting in poor decision-making and missed opportunities. Even when organizational members are aware of the need to revise their mental models, the sudden occurrence of crises may leave no room or time for such activities. However, organizations that operate according to the principles of the learning organization are aware that ambiguous situations allow for different learning experiences by empowered organizational members who receive new information as a basis for collective sense-making and often improvise and design new solutions along with new mental models.

Practitioners looking for guidance in the literature will be surprised to find that crisis management and organizational change are studied separately, which has been unified by [Andres & Heo \(2023\)](#) and their integrative framework for organizational transformation in times of crisis. Organizational transformation often resembles metamorphosis, which requires transformational learning ([Mezirow, 1997](#)). Transformational learning leads to a change in one's personal and/or organizational frame of reference when confronted with challenges that cause one to question existing beliefs. After such a change, new goals and even a new mission are established. However, a crisis requires agile learning that is flexible, uses different methods and approaches, and benefits from collaboration with different stakeholders, but also from failures that are seen as a source of new learning and

experimentation. Even though agile learning can be viewed as incremental learning, it gives organizational members a sense of ownership and a sense of moving forward. It also allows for a broader sense of purpose, which makes it a good learning approach for ambiguous situations such as emerging crises. [Andres & Heo \(2023\)](#) also suggest that practitioners consider contextual learning and strategic learning, in which an organization seeks knowledge to identify strategies, policies and actions to achieve a desired future. This could be followed by collective integration, where learning from different stakeholders is integrated and leads to a shared understanding of the approach to address a crisis situation.

Transformational leadership for organizational transformation

[Hariharan & Anand \(2023\)](#) address learning flows and how they can be influenced by transformational leadership. Optimizing learning flows is key to improving an organization's learning capability and its competitive advantage. Employees represent the human capital of the organization and the individual learning stock. [Hariharan & Anand \(2023\)](#) state that the individual learning stock, i.e. the competencies and motivation required for effective task performance, is influenced by feed-forward and feed-back learning flows. Feed-forward learning flows introduce new learning into the loop and stimulate the exploration of new ideas. Learning always begins with an individual who has experiences or insights that are shared with other team or organizational members in a collective sense-making until a group understanding is reached and incorporated into new actions ([Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999](#)). If successful, they become embedded in future routines or plans, policies, procedures, etc. Such feed-forward learning flows are very important for creating new organizational knowledge. While feedback flows aim at exploitation of what has already been learned, feed-forward flows support the assimilation of new learning. However, this process should be supported by the right kind of leadership.

Transformational leadership is based on the close relationship between the leader and the employees and develops a shared vision, creates a learning climate with high expectations and promotes learning experiences through intellectual stimulation ([Bass, 1991](#)). Transformational leaders are usually charismatic, and by stimulating their employees' learning, they also learn from them and promote organizational change. Intellectual stimulation is often cited as one of the most important characteristics of transformational leaders. In the learning environment, it is also very important for stimulating learning loops, especially feed-forward learning loops that stimulate the generation of new insights and their collective interpretation through open discussion and dialog, leading to new learning, change and transformation when the decision is made that it is necessary or useful.

[Hariharan & Anand \(2023\)](#) found that transformational leadership strengthens followers' learning stocks and that such learning stocks lead to increased feed-forward learning flows. When there is transformational leadership and the learning stock is high, transformational leadership stimulates feed-forward learning flows more intensely. In this way, transformational leadership promotes not only individual learning but also double-loop and exploratory learning, leading to more profound organizational change.

How leadership influences organizational citizenship?

Libraries are places where new knowledge can be explored, found and disseminated, either online or on-site. They can be described as an environment where individuals are encouraged to learn freely and continuously, with the support of professionals to guide them. However, with the recent surge in information and communication technology, many users are finding their way to online libraries and using artificial intelligence to find the

content they want. This also increases the pressure on librarians to constantly learn and develop their skills to better serve their patrons. For this reason, Tram (2023) studied the level of technical, human and conceptual skills of librarians in Vietnam. Technical skills refer to a person's ability to use principles, methods, techniques and tools to perform tasks efficiently and effectively. Human skills refer to the social skills needed for communication, negotiation and teamwork. Conceptual skills refer to a person's ability to see and understand the big picture, design solutions and ensure that the organization's vision, mission and goals are clear and achieved. All three types of skills are important for leaders.

Organizational citizenship behavior can apply to organizations and individuals and can be task related (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2005). Organizational citizenship behavior refers to organizations that contribute to better relationships with stakeholders and the environment through flexible work arrangements, support, etc., which leads to a better reputation and better relationships with stakeholders. Individuals can also exhibit good organizational citizenship behavior by helping others, acting ethically and promoting dialog and inclusive solutions. Task-based organizational citizenship behaviors refer to employees who go above and beyond what is expected of them in their work or who show initiative to solve problems. These behaviors are significantly influenced by leadership. When leaders acknowledge and encourage these behaviors, it is likely to result in higher employee engagement. Leaders also develop an organizational culture. When positive and supportive, this can provide a sense of unity, direction and belonging and encourage employees to engage in proactive behaviors that contribute to the organization's well-being and reputation.

Surprisingly, Tran (2023) found that a bureaucratic culture significantly influences employee behavior in Vietnamese libraries. This type of culture promotes order, stability and efficiency by establishing procedures, rules and systems and requiring compliance. An innovative and supportive culture does not seem to help managers implement organizational citizenship behaviors. This result should be interpreted from a cultural perspective, as there is a high power distance in this country. This simply means that it is the leaders and the employees who can make a difference in the organizations despite organizational or cultural constraints. Bureaucratic culture is also critical for organizations with complex needs, such as large libraries. Therefore, practitioners should build their leadership skills and support their staff to follow them enthusiastically and be willing to go the extra mile. It was also found that technical, human and conceptual skills of leaders help libraries achieve their goals more efficiently, resulting in higher performance. However, higher levels of human skills were found to promote employee citizenship behaviors. This proves that leaders should understand that the key to leadership is followership, or, as Harry Truman said, "The ability to get people to do what they do not like to do and get them to like it."

What is the role of leadership in health-care organizations?

Practitioners in health-care organizations face complex treatment and organizational issues. They must meet the increasing demand for medical care while maintaining their tight budgets. High physical and emotional stress, long work hours and resource scarcity pose particular challenges for staff. For this reason, Kuntz *et al.* (2023) examined the ambidexterity of managers in public health organizations in New Zealand. In challenging and complex situations, leaders should be able to be ambidextrous, that is, to balance using existing knowledge to achieve the highest possible level of health care and exploring or learning and generating new knowledge. They should also encourage ambidexterity among their staff, who should not be afraid to experiment, take risks and search for new pathways

and treatments. However, they must always be aware of the need to maintain a high level of efficiency to achieve the set goals with the least amount of resources and to use existing skills productively. However, their behavior is highly context-dependent, so ambidexterity is context-dependent as well. Leaders face additional challenges because they are confronted with many paradoxes or contradictory elements that coexist, persist and are interrelated (Smith & Lewis, 2011). They should be aware of these ambiguities, learn from them and seek integrative solutions. Kuntz *et al.* (2023) assumed that leaders' paradoxical thinking would enhance their ambidexterity, or exploration and utilization of knowledge.

However, the results showed that health-care leaders were more concerned with knowledge utilization (exploitation) and implemented ambidexterity only to some extent. Paradoxical thinking was also not found to predict higher ambidexterity. However, those who exhibited higher levels of ambidexterity were also more likely to engage in reflective learning and thinking. It is questionable, however, whether today's health-care leaders and their staff have the discretion to research and experiment extensively. Even when they are at the source of information about treatment outcomes and have access to new knowledge, it typically takes years, if not decades, for a new practice or treatment to be incorporated into standard care. Health care is a high-risk field and prone to litigation. Leaders try to mitigate this risk by prescribing standards of care with precise rules and procedures that physicians must follow even when such activities could harm the patient. By following established protocols, they reduce their legal liability. Even though the medical field has evolved significantly, there is still much to learn that is context-specific because no two people are alike. This means that medical professionals should be given more authority and autonomy to find the best possible treatment by engaging in exploratory activities that include responsible experimentation, collective sense-making, dialog and knowledge sharing through open dialog with all stakeholders. Only then will the medical profession be able to respond successfully to the challenges that fast-paced life, stress and pollution pose to the majority of today's population. The answer always lies in more learning, open dialog, knowledge sharing and authenticity for all.

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