INVITED ARTICLE

The learning organization as paradox

Being for the learning organization also means being against it

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe and discuss the idea of the learning organisation as a paradox and to explore the implications of this idea for improving the longevity and influence of the learning organisation concept.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents qualitative data drawn from MBA students’ involvement in learning about leadership. Participants’ written reflections on the “Temporary Learning Organisation (TLO) Exercise” are used to illustrate paradoxical tensions emerging from their attempts to lead the emergence of a learning organisation.

Findings – Three inter-connected paradoxical tensions are identified: inhibited freedom, detached engagement and ambivalent enthusiasm. These can help to explain how processes and practices that encourage learning in organisations are inseparable from those that undermine the effort to learn.

Originality/value – The paper presents a novel way of looking at the debate between the learning organisation as a positive ideal, and the learning organisation as negative ideology. A paradox viewpoint is focused on sustaining tensions because they generate possibilities. There is much to be learned from the interplay between the desire to create ongoing learning opportunities and conscious and unconscious efforts to avoid and undermine them.

Keywords Learning organizations, Leadership, Paradox, Contradictions

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

My argument is that we should reimagine the Learning Organisation as a paradox. Organisational paradox refers to “contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 387). Paradox involves the concurrent presence of contradictory elements that are bound together as two sides of the same coin (Lewis, 2000) and that persist because they are impervious to resolution (Smith, 2014). Learning in organisations mobilises two contradictory and concurrent dynamics. The ability to create “learning-in-action”, to mobilise ongoing transformations of capability and practice, is often accompanied by “learning inaction”, which reflects emotional and political limits to learning that are characteristic of an organisation (Vince, 2008). Organisations inevitably contain discomfort, ambivalence and resistance to learning alongside willingness and enthusiasm for learning. Learning takes place in an emotional and political context that is as wedded to the established social order as it is desirous of making changes to it.
The general way in which I am expressing the Learning Organisation as paradox is through the phrase: “being for the learning organization also means being against it”. Maintaining tensions provides a basis for critique. Any desire to create ongoing learning opportunities, to encourage collaboration and team learning, will be intimately connected to resistance to learning in an organisation, to conscious and unconscious efforts to avoid and undermine it. The desire to learn and the effort to resist learning are inseparable and persistent. If we can understand this, then we can begin to liberate the Learning Organisation concept from its own unhelpful and somewhat relentless positivity. We can start to comprehend, for example, how the rhetoric and accepted practices of the Learning Organisation can be used to support adaptation to a system of conformity and compliance, just as much as transformation from it.

This also means that the mechanisms that characterise the Learning Organisation need to be set in a dualistic and, therefore, a more politically realistic context. The development of a Learning Organisation cannot be based solely on positive prescriptions for development, for example, improving organisational culture, embedding reflection or enhancing communication. Learning is much more likely when these positive prescriptions are deliberately set alongside their opposite: that organisations maintain toxic cultures, they ignore and exclude reflection, and they continuously fudge communication, especially across sub-system boundaries.

I think that framing the Learning Organisation as paradox offers one way of improving its longevity and influence as a concept with continuing relevance to organisations. From this position, it is not important to decide whether the Learning Organisation concept is dead or alive (Pedler and Burgoyne, 2017), but to accept that it is both dead and alive. The Learning Organisation concept reflects a moment in the past that is gone, when learning was a particularly resonant buzzword in management and organisation studies. It also reflects an idea that should never go away, that organisations must find ways to support and perpetuate learning as a basis for growth, innovation and change.

**Organisational paradox and the learning organisation**

The interplay between paradoxical tensions generates creative energy and opens possibilities for change (Schad et al., 2016; Smith, 2014). Indeed, maintaining tensions over time has been recognised as an important aspect of “healthy” systems (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010; Putnam, 2015). One example is provided by Heracleous and Wirtz (2014, p. 141) who discuss how Singapore Airlines “simultaneously balances dual capabilities (seen as poles of the paradoxes) that most other organizations would consider distinct or incompatible”. The persistence of paradoxical elements means that they are dynamic (they are continuous, enacted over time and an integral part of ongoing processes) and mutually reinforcing (as part of ongoing processes, they are interrelated and irresolvable).

Other scholars have already pointed out the dualities that persist in Learning Organisations. For example, that experiences and activities that can be described as “teaching” sit alongside those that encourage learning (French and Bazalgette, 1996). Driver (2002) captures the ongoing tension between optimistic views of the Learning Organisation as positive ideal, and critical views of the Learning Organisation as negative ideology. She proposes a “middle ground” that incorporates elements of both perspectives. While these papers highlight dualities and tensions, neither explores how these dual elements are persistently bound together. The paradox viewpoint does not seek to identify a middle way; it is about sustaining tensions because they generate possibilities. As I argue above, there is much to be learned from the interplay between the desire to create ongoing learning opportunities and conscious and unconscious efforts to avoid and undermine them.
A paradox perspective attempts to shift organisational thinking from “either/or” approaches to tensions towards “both/and” approaches. “Traditional theory relies on rational, logical and linear approaches, whereas a paradox perspective emerges from the surprising, counterintuitive and tense” (Lewis and Smith, 2014, p. 143). This suggests that a paradox perspective is inevitably bound up with the emotions generated through complex organisational experience, both individual and collective. Organisational actors may encounter paradox as a “discomforting tug-of-war” that evokes emotions:

On one hand, actors may respond defensively, clinging to the pole that supports their preferred priorities, skills, and routines [...] Yet anxiety, fear, and discomfort may also foster creativity, innovation, and change through more strategic responses (Lewis and Smith, 2014, p. 135).

For example, in their discussion of innovation paradoxes in product design companies, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2010) identify individuals’ “healthy wariness” as a part of reinforcing a collective mindset of paradox. Fears and concerns are inevitably part of this wariness, but are also seen as integral to the evolution of shared responsibility for managing paradoxes across organisational levels.

Applying a paradox perspective to the Learning Organisation construct helps us to view the emotional and political complexity of the organisational context in which learning takes place. For example, take the following definition as a starting point:

Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles (Watkins and Marsick, 1992, p. 118).

Processes of collaboration towards change are unlikely to be entirely collaborative. Attempts to encourage collaboration are locked together with the competitiveness that underpins our lived experience of organisations. The people we collaborate with are probably the same people we are competing with for resources, promotion, the ear of the chief executive officer, etc. Our own desires to learn through collaboration are mixed up with our ambivalence towards others, our defensiveness in the face of learning, and our habits and attachments to individualised and self-serving ways of thinking and working. It is holding these tensions together that is most likely to support and sustain learning because this is a more realistic depiction of the organisational context within which learning takes place. I want to explore this further with an example.

The Temporary Learning Organisation exercise
I identify tensions that are likely to be integral to the emotional, relational and political context of attempts to create a Learning Organisation. I am using participant reflections from my teaching with MBA students, who undertake a five-day, experiential module on leadership[1]. Throughout the whole of the second day, students participate in an exercise called the Temporary Learning Organisation (TLO) exercise. The organisational task of the TLO is to learn about leadership in context. Participants are given an initial structure of three groups. Each of these groups selects one individual to be in the role of Senior Manager, and another individual for the role of Process Consultant. Once these selections are made, the three Senior Managers have full authority to deliver on the organisational task, as well as accountability for its success. They can restructure or redirect the organisation in any way that they think will achieve this task. Through reflections on all participants’ attempts to learn within the emotional, relational and political context of the TLO, it is possible to identify some persistent behavioural tensions that characterise the Learning Organisation paradox.
The TLO exercise is about understanding the organisation that MBA students (in the roles of both leaders and followers) create together, both consciously and unconsciously, in the classroom. This means reflecting on, for example, the emotions generated in the module group; what makes it function and malfunction; the limits and possibilities of learning and change; and the ability or inability of its members to communicate and contribute. The exercise is designed to help MBA students to see that organisations are complex emotional and political environments, where there is considerable confusion and ineffectiveness in addition to effective action and achievement of tasks. It invites MBA students to move beyond a conceptualisation of leadership as an individual skill and capability, to recognise that leadership is also a process that can explore and exploit the collective capacity to learn within organisations. I have identified three inter-connected, paradoxical tensions that arise in relation to MBA students’ attempts to learn in the TLO. I call these inhibited freedom, detached engagement and ambivalent enthusiasm. I have found that it is the not learning in the TLO exercise that particularly helps MBA students to comprehend the ongoing emotional, relational and political effects of the organisation they have collectively created and willingly reinforce.

Inhibited freedom
The MBA students who attend my leadership course are both practicing managers and full-time students, all with experience of organisations. It is a highly international group. The module gives them considerable freedom to think, to reflect and to learn. However, all of them have developed habits and attachments to ways of thinking about leadership (and learning) that limit their ability to fully comprehend the “messy world” of leadership in practice (Denis et al., 2010). They have not done this alone. Their organisations reinforce expectations, values and rules that create self-limiting structures and approaches to leadership behaviour and practice. I find that my students (all names are pseudonyms) tend to rely, without much thought or reflection, on habitual leadership behaviour, at the same time as wanting to break free of it. They want to learn, and they remain constrained in relation to learning. For example:

The TLO didn’t function properly and we were not able to achieve the given task. The malfunctioning of the organization flowed from the leadership to followership. There was no sense-making of what was happening. Leadership didn’t connect with followers other than giving instructions. Both leadership (of which I was one) and followers focused excessively on what is expected or required of leading, being a “good leader” and ignored what was happening in the group. (Jane)

Leaders were reluctant to relax the imposed barriers between the smaller groups. Each group remained in a silo and there was very little knowledge or learning transfer between the groups. Teams were quite insular in their approach and did not make any real effort in understanding the wider context of the challenge. (Charles)

The participants who put themselves (or find themselves put) in the role of Senior Managers are given the freedom to lead the TLO in any way that they want to. However, the self-imposed limits of this freedom soon become apparent. The sense of responsibility that they immediately mobilise in relation to their role becomes a burden, and this is reinforced by their struggle to stand above the groups that put them in this position:

Having been assigned three small groups at the start, the TLO broadly failed to move out of these all day. We stuck to the only bit of structure we were issued with. This draws on anxieties created through learnt behaviours. As tension grew, the group did not adapt nor challenge the
environment it had created, meaning the learning opportunity was stifled and anxiety began to rise again. This played out in the TLO reflection where blame was laid on others, particularly those deemed to be in positions of power (SMT, process consultants, professor), as individuals failed to accept responsibility, reflecting their own anxiety about failure back on to others. (Susan).

The small groups in the exercise often behave in insular ways. Group members stay (metaphorically if not literally) “locked” in their breakout rooms, with very little interest in engaging with other groups. The resulting “silos” have a profound impact on the organisation, limiting both communication and creativity in the organisation as a whole.

**Detached engagement**

For participants in the role of Senior Managers, and those in the role of followers, there is continuous tension between the freedom to learn in the TLO and their inhibitions about doing so. This tension produces strong individual and collective emotions throughout the day. On the one hand, participants have a very strong desire to fulfil the task of learning about leadership. On the other hand, they continuously come up against their own defences against learning. Defences against learning reduce the risk that emotions will overwhelm the task, but in doing so, they remove the creative potential of those emotions to inform and support the task. Defences are enacted individually. For example:

> Why had I made the decision not to share with the group that I knew nothing more of the task than they did? Was I trying to have control over the group? I even encouraged small group silos without consciously realising that this could be a projection of my fear of feeling out of control in the wider group. (Amanda)

(The Leader) chose an authoritarian leadership style. He avoided his team members’ emotions and focused strictly on the tasks to be performed. Thus, his enthusiasm was limited to himself rather than being transferred to the rest of the team. His controlling approach caused alienation of other team members’ emotions, which caused emotional exhaustion and inadequate performance. As a result, his team members developed negative emotions such as the feeling of being mistreated, low loyalty and satisfaction that lead to an unsatisfactory experience with lack of progress toward the final project. (Maalik)

Defences are also enacted collectively. For example:

> Once in position, leaders began to display two distinct attributes. Firstly, they accepted responsibility for followers’ emotional needs. Following the initial checks that followers agreed that the individual could represent them as their leader, the individual concerned themselves with ensuring that the followers felt they were getting what they needed from their leader and that the task was progressing satisfactorily. In an extension to this approach, the leader also appeared to take on responsibility for each person’s output, either in response to being nominated as leader or due to the lack of engagement of the followers. (Mike)

From a defensive position, blame becomes a prevalent social emotion that shapes organisational behaviour and structure. For example, it is easy to blame the senior managers in the exercise when they do not interact with the various small groups in the TLO. Group members imagine that they don’t know “what we should be doing”, which makes them critical of the senior managers. Boredom or ambivalence is added to blame, and reinforces the divisions between the different layers of the organisation. In this environment, it becomes increasingly difficult to lead and to follow. Making themselves responsible for others’ emotions in preference to engaging with their own, means that leaders in the TLO create an overly protective and unchallenging environment in which conflict is avoided and
Ambivalent enthusiasm

The choices made by members of the TLO, whatever role they find themselves in, can seem logical at the time. It is only later that the underlying reasons become clear. For example, their very first choice about who will take up an explicit authority role in relation to learning is usually portrayed as rational and proactive (“he was young and keen to learn”). However, other dynamics are often present, for example, that nobody else could be bothered to do it, that the person chosen has been set up to fail, that group members don’t want to contribute to the task, or they just want to be told what to do. For example:

We selected Khalid as our senior management team representative as he was young and keen to learn. We should have replaced at least one senior manager with someone more experienced when it became evident that all groups had taken the same approach. I was happy to let Khalid lead us and initiate a discussion on leadership in context but became frustrated when the task continued to lack direction. I should have discussed my feelings with the group rather than bottling up the frustration. (James).

The Temporary Learning Organization on the second day showed me that despite our apparent magnanimity in nominating our youngest member as the leader, it is often easier to ask someone else to lead than to do it yourself. I realised that leaders can latch on to power in a destructive way, and that no team can function in a self-contained manner. (Samah)

Ambivalence becomes particularly prevalent for the followers in the TLO. This is in part self-inflicted because they project leadership responsibility into the Senior Managers and abandon it as part of their own role. It arises also from not knowing how to behave in the role of follower within the TLO in the service of fulfilling the task. For example:

Followers showed a reluctance to participate, delegating all responsibility for the success of the task to the leaders. This put undue pressure on the leadership team to deliver results and allowed the followers to relinquish responsibility and ride out the day. (Charles)

The anxiety was so strong that once a leader had nominated themselves, all followers were keen to hand over responsibility to that leader and support them in achieving the task however the leader wished […] Having exchanged control for emotional security, followers were then reluctant to offer their own thoughts or to attempt to direct the progress of the task. Not only did this have the effect of concentrating opinion and direction with the leader only, it also led to disengagement of the followers from the design and participation in the task. (Mike)

To summarise, I have found that MBA students’ conscious and unconscious efforts to avoid creating a TLO to fulfil a task related to learning are as significant as their attempts to lead such efforts. From a pedagogic viewpoint, students’ struggles to create and to sustain their idea of a Learning Organisation in practice within my MBA module provide them with a useful mirror of the contradictory dynamics mobilised by attempts to learn in organisations. They carry with them three inter-linked paradoxical tensions. Inhibited freedom arises from the tension between habitual behaviour that restricts their ability to learn, and the freedom to enact their authority in the service of learning. Detached engagement arises from defensiveness. On the one hand, defences reduce the risk that emotions will overwhelm the
task of learning, but in doing so, they remove the creative potential of those emotions to inform and support learning. **Ambivalent enthusiasm** arises from an active lack of interest in experimenting with the possibilities and pitfalls of leadership and followership roles, while seeming to be enthusiastic about it.

A central idea of the TLO, and I would argue the contemporary Learning Organisation construct, is that learning involves the capacity to unsettle the expected or given “way we do things here”. The exercise asks MBA students to allow their expectations and assumptions, their preferred ways of thinking and working, their anxieties and attachments, to be unsettled enough to let learning in. Some students connect to this idea immediately (others take a bit longer):

The “Temporary Learning Organization” exercise was very effective and made me doubt about my leadership capabilities. Till then, I was very confident that as a leader, I can handle a group no matter what the dimensions of the group are. However, although I had all the resources to finish the task, I had a blind eye for several factors which made me inefficient and reflecting on the whole exercise has been the most important learning curve for me. (Parang)

**Conclusion: being both for and against the Learning Organisation**

I am for the Learning Organisation as paradox. Both in the research and practice associated with this construct, our focus should be on the tensions that are always mobilised by attempts to learn, as well as finding ways to hold these tensions together in our theory and practice. We can’t expect to create environments that support learning if we don’t also recognise the ways in which these environments will help to resist, avoid and constrain learning. I am against the Learning Organisation as an ideal of organisation, as a description of positive performance, as limited and ultimately limiting lists of capabilities. I am against any understanding of the Learning Organisation that does not consider the emotional, relational and political complexities and contradictions of learning. My view is that the Learning Organisation can continue to be an interesting and relevant idea for the organisation of learning if we can recognise that there is always tension involved in placing the words learning and organisation together.

**Note**

1. This module runs annually. Since 2013, participants have given permission for their module essays and reflective journal summaries to be used as part of an ongoing research project on learning about leadership.

**References**


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