Fostering a Learning Organization

INTRODUCTION

Continuous learning is a key critical success factor of the Leadership and Knowledge Management system. In such an environment, leaders foster a learning culture that provides opportunities for continuous development and encourages employees to participate. Leaders also invest in education, training, and other developmental opportunities to help themselves and their employees build mission-critical competencies.

Some organizations conduct business with an *"if it isn't broken, don't fix it"* attitude until one day, they find they have to make major changes in their organizations to continue to compete.

A learning organization is one that continually expands its ability to shape its future. For a modern, knowledge-based, service-focused business to survive and be successful, learning must be linked to the strategic goals of the organization. The organization's goal is to make continual learning a way of organizational life in order to improve the performance of the organization as a total system.

LEARNING ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW

According to Peter Senge, a leading expert in the field of organizational management, the core of learning organization work is based on five "learning disciplines"—continuous programs of study and practice. These "learning disciplines" are shown in the following illustration.

Fostering a Learning Organization (continued)
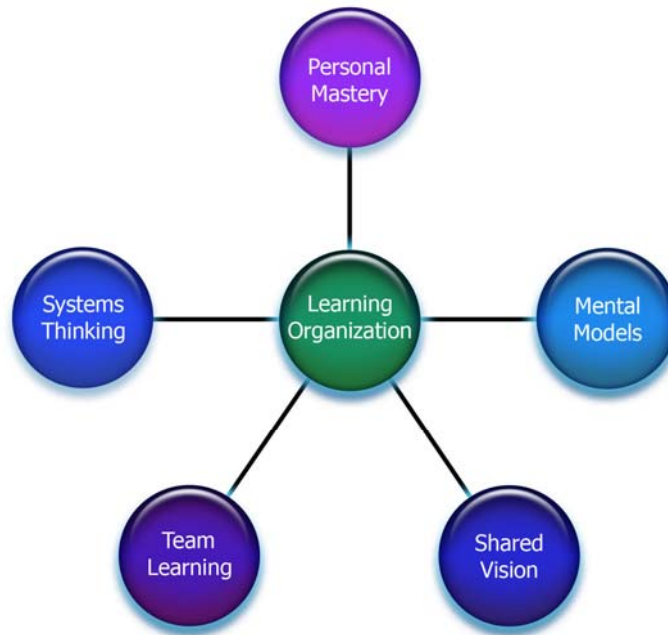
| Learning Organization | The concept of a learning organization is beginning to emerge in many organizations today. The following paragraphs describe how some learning organization activities may be developed. |

Personal Mastery

In the past, education ended when an individual received credentials. Now, education is becoming continuous, deliberate, organizational learning. A comprehensive career management system (CMS) can be developed that will provide systematic career progression and training for personnel in each stage of their careers. To create this system, competencies required in many critical organizational areas are identified and ways to assess current skill levels are researched. In addition, a continuing education program is created that will identify important continuing education topics and training needs for the workforce. The CMS will enhance an organizational environment that encourages all members to continually develop themselves.

Fostering a Learning Organization (continued)

Mental Models

The stability and security traditionally associated with corporate jobs are being replaced by accelerated change, speed, and a reinvented, entrepreneurial system that requires the workforce to remain competitive and marketable. These changes have a significant impact on the organization's ability to gain and sustain a well-trained workforce with leading-edge technical skills and managerial abilities. In a more competitive and uncertain environment, organizations must have workforces with the skills and flexibility to successfully meet their missions wherever and whenever the need arises.

To empower a responsive, flexible workforce, traditional ways of doing business must be re-evaluated. Job kits and new approaches to job placement can be developed. Also, a job rotational system may be designed to support the development of a multi-skilled workforce. Finally, the organization should create an assessment system that identifies employees with high potential for multi-tasking.

Shared Vision

The organization's top management must be devoted to building a sense of commitment among personnel by developing a shared vision of the organization's future. This may be accomplished by holding "all-hands" meetings and distributing materials that establish a shared understanding of the organization's mission and vision and the values of all employees.

Team Learning

Individual assignments and hierarchical taskings will give way in the learning organization to high-performance work teams that own and manage processes. Guidelines for matrix management can be developed to include an information system and management structure to support management in quickly identifying, bringing together, and tasking a team of employees to do a job.

Systems Thinking   Employees must be empowered and encouraged to form partnerships to maximize their exposure to various issues. The workforce that was once stovepiped and single-focused will need to be diversified, fully networked, and knowledgeable across organizational functions in the learning organization. This process can be facilitated through both formal and informal informational networking (for example, holding monthly brown bag luncheons with colleagues or instituting Communities of Practice).

Systems thinking recognizes that changes intended to improve performance in one part of the organization can affect other parts of the organization with surprising, often negative consequences. For example, decisions based solely on information at the local level can be counterproductive to the system as a whole. The art of systems thinking also includes learning to develop processes that integrate people horizontally and across functions.

For additional information on learning organizations and the core learning disciplines, see *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* by Peter M. Senge, 1990, and *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, by Peter Senge and other authors, 1994.