

# The Learning Organization



# Learning Organization

## Definition: David Garvin

From Learning in Action, 2000:

A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge, and at purposely modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.”

# Organizational Learning

“Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error.”

- Chris Argyris.

- Error is the mismatch between what we intend an action to produce and what happens as a result of our action.
- Action is the means by which we give meaning to life.
- Single and double loop learning

**When everyone is engaged in identifying and solving problems, enabling the organization to continuously experiment, improve, and increase its capability (Daft, 1998)**

**Needs:**

- **Awareness**
- **Analysis**
- **Meaning Making**
- **Debate, dialogue, discussion**
- **Information dissemination**
- **Application**
- **Assessment**

## **Four distinct categories:**

- 1. Knowledge acquisition – Get!**
- 2. Information distribution – Get to the right people!**
- 3. Information interpretation – Get it right!**
- 4. Organizational memory – Don't Forget!**

## **Paradigms of traditional learning:**

- Organizations have prepared responses to stimuli – means-ends relationships “knee-jerk” reactions**
- Organizations are not built to learn**
- Goals are efficiency and establishing “norms” of thinking – not creative problem-solving**

## **New Paradigm:**

- **Action-outcome relationships are environmentally driven**
- **Groups of people create and share responses to stimuli for congruency and consistency**
- **Anticipating, reacting, and responding to change “when it is needed”**
- **The ability of an organization to gain insight through:**
  - **Experimentation**
  - **Observation and internalizing “best practices”**
  - **Analysis**
  - **Willingness to examine both successes and failures**

## **Tools and Utilization**

- 1. Systematic thinking – all things are parts of larger systems**
- 2. Shared vision – all looking down the same path towards the sun**
- 3. Personal mastery – be the best at the best**
- 4. Team learning – not knowledge hoarding**
- 5. Creative tension (link vision with current reality)**
- 6. Adaptive learning – learn from mistakes and changes**

## **Thinking - Firms become:**

- **Self-designing**
- **Promoters of structural continuous change**
- **An ongoing state of experimentation**
- **Risk takers**
- **Fervent communicators**

# **Manager/Leader Roles:**

**Designers**

**Teachers**

**Stewards**

**Learners**

**Builders**

**Facilitators**

**Change Agents**

**Cheerleaders**

# Linking Strategy to Learning:

- **No single strategy – constant strategic thinking – planned and emerging**
  - **Planning is learning – making sense of chaos**
- **Creation of “mental models” of decision making**
  - **Fostering learning verses rigid plans**
- **Preparing for uncertainties while continuously asking “what if?”**

## **13 Learning Organization Ideal Traits:**

- 1. Teachers are learners and learners are teachers**
  - 2. Everyone improves and becomes the best they can be**
  - 3. TEAMS talk!**
  - 4. Experimentation is a necessity**
  - 5. Risk taking is rewarded**
  - 6. Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial**
  - 7. People seek to help and “elevate” all around them unselfishly**
  - 8. Values-mission-vision are lived**
  - 9. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts**
  - 10. Systems and double loop thinking**
  - 11. Error detection and repair**
  - 12. Passion for Excellence**
  - 13. Optimal quality is never achieved – continuous learning**
- Dave’s # 14 – Prevention verses cure thinking**

# LO systems, mechanisms and processes

**Learning organisations are those that:**

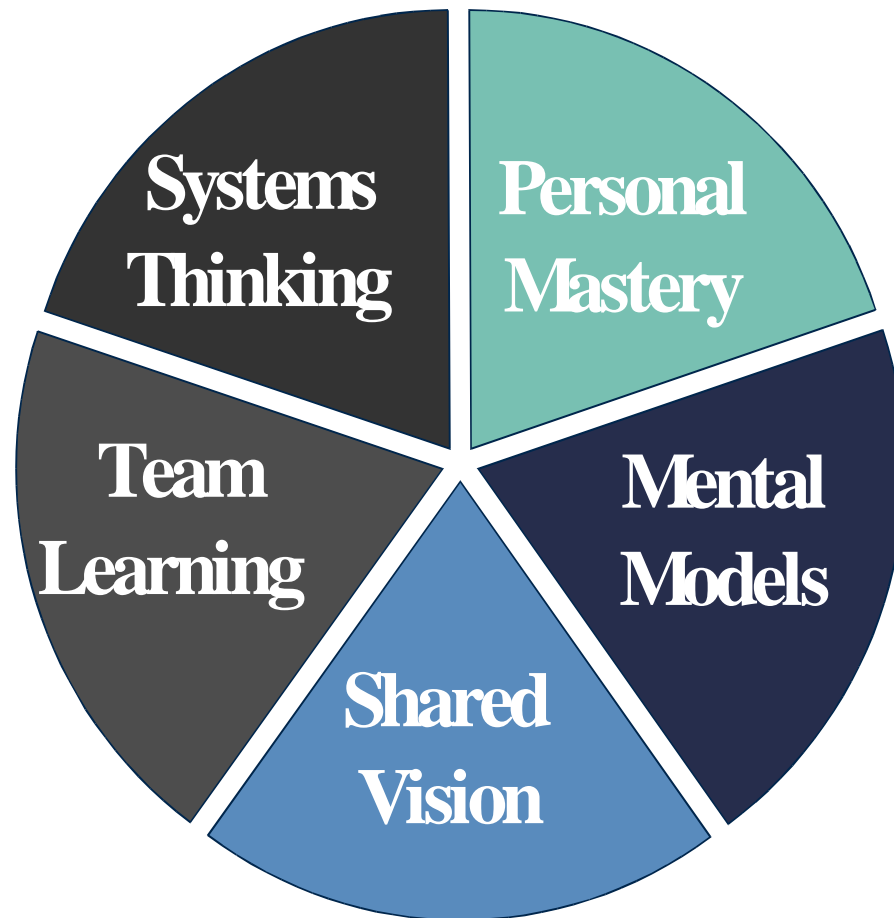
- **have systems, mechanisms & processes in place,**
- **are used to continually enhance their capabilities and those who work with it or for it, to achieve sustainable objectives - for themselves and the communities in which they participate.**

**What systems, mechanisms and processes?**

## **Requires**

- **Trust, consistency, attitude of inquiry**
- **High levels of communication**
- **Concern for interdependencies & interrelationships**

# Peter Senge's Five Disciplines



# Learning Organization

## Definition: Peter Senge

From The Fifth Discipline

organizations:

- continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire
- where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured
- where collective aspiration is set free, and
- where people are continually learning how to learn together

# 1. Systems Thinking

- A framework for understanding the structures, patterns, and relationships that mold organizational behavior
- A discipline for seeing wholes
- Permits identification of ways to change
- Acknowledges the power of internal processes (not individuals, not outside forces) in shaping work

## 2. Personal Mastery

- Commitment, with proficiency, by the individual to own lifelong learning
- A discipline in which the individual constantly clarifies what is important and sees reality clearly
- Grounded in competence and skills
- Generates a sense of purpose, power, self-worth, and a personal vision

# 3. Mental Models

- Deeply held internal images of how the world works
- A discipline for shaping these personal pictures of the world and understanding how they affect individual action
- Can be consciously examined and shaped

# 4. Shared Vision

- Ability to maintain a collective picture of a future that is sought
- Reflects a desire to be connected and becomes part of pursuing a larger purpose that is embodied in the organization's services
- Commitment is by choice, not compliance
- Scenario planning: tool to build shared vision

# 5. Team Learning

- Begins with skilled discussion, dialogue
- Skilled discussion: conversation guided by a repertoire of techniques that help members fit together the pieces of their situation
- Dialogue: the free, creative expression and exploration of ideas
- A group discipline leading to alignment of members' thoughts and achievement of desired results

# Senge's model overcomes:

- Linear thinking, reactive responses
- Controlling leadership
- Negative mental models
- Lack of vision
- Individual competition and product orientation

# Core Competencies for the Learning Organization:

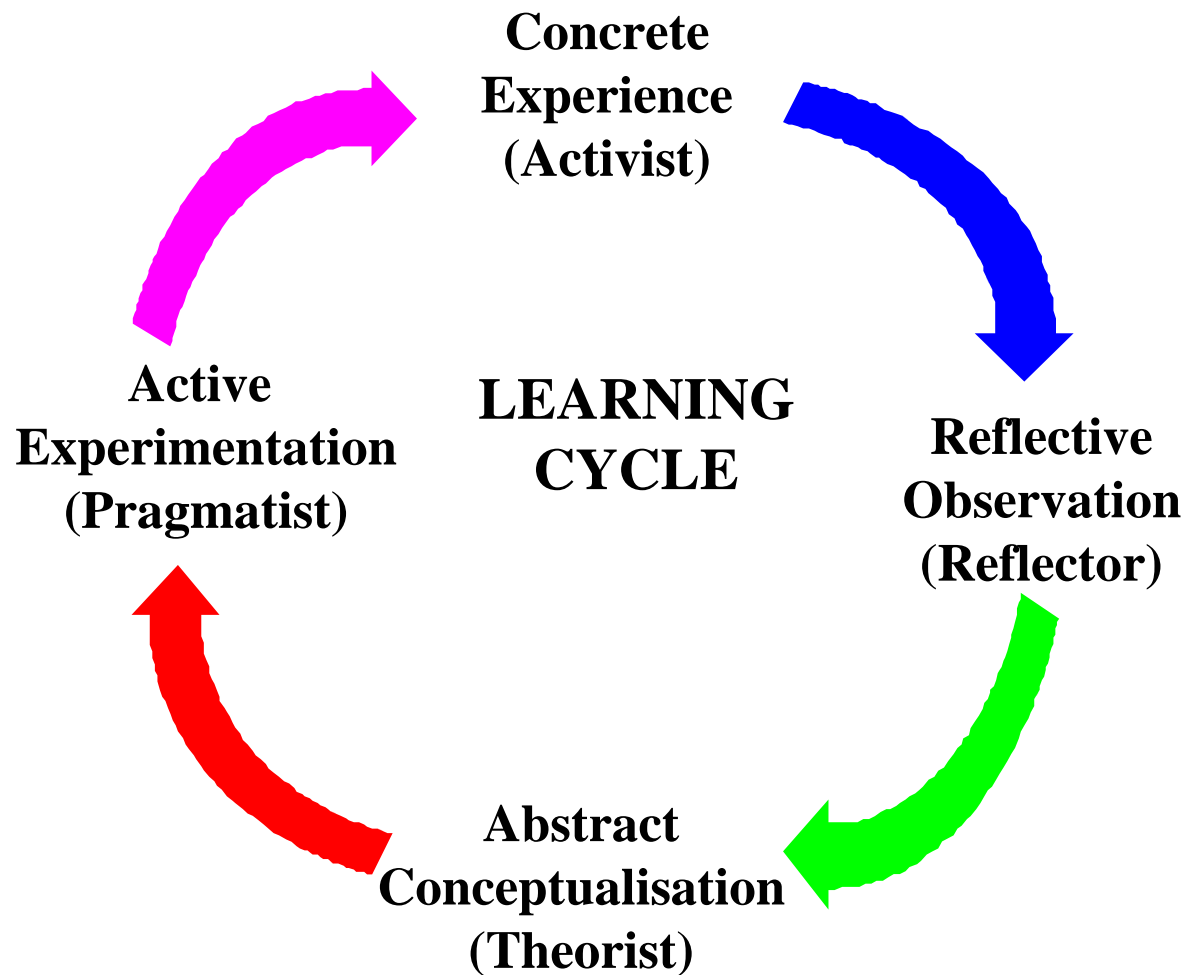
- Analytical skills, problem solving, decision making
- Communication skills
- Creativity, innovation
- Expertise and technical knowledge
- Flexibility, adaptability
- Interpersonal, group skills

# Core Competencies (Con't):

- Leadership
- Organizational understanding and global thinking
- Ownership, accountability, dependability
- Planning and organizational skills
- Resource management ability
- Service attitude, user satisfactory

# Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle

A model for personal awareness & development



# **M. Pedler: The Learning Company - 11 characteristics**

- **Adopt a learning approach to strategy**
- **Participative policy making**
- **Informating (Information Systems)**
- **Formative accounting – valuing, self-responsibility, appraisal, targeting, resourcing and review**
- **Internal exchange (client-server relationships)**
- **Reward flexibility**
- **Roles and flexible, matrix structures**
- **Boundary workers as intelligence agents**
- **Company-to-company learning**
- **Learning climate**
- **Self-development opportunities for all**

# Reality and Problems?

## Personal Mastery

### **Making It Work**

- Managers must
  - redefine their job
  - provide the right conditions for employees to be proactive
- Generating a sense of purpose

**How can this be  
“operationalized”?  
Evidence of it  
happening well?**

### **The Tricky Part**

- Resistance to PM due to difficulty in quantifying results
- Ideas behind PM have been heard before
- People forced to develop PM
  - may do more harm than good

# Reality and Problems? Mental Models

## Making It Work

- Skills learned must be
  - put into regular practice
  - continually challenged
- Strong role of manager to integrate mental modelling and systems-thinking skills

**How can this be  
“operationalized”?  
Evidence of it  
happening well?**

## The Tricky Part

- Managers not always very skilled in implementing new ideas
- People find it difficult to challenge assumptions they believe to be “the case”
- Some people act in routine ways when they are at work

# Reality and Problems? Shared Vision

## Making It Work

- the focus and energy for learning
- put together by many not a few
- better when considered intrinsically at the organisational level.

## The Tricky Part

- Compliance not commitment
- Extrinsic visions are usually personally held and are defensive
- Vision is usually top-down - does not have as good an affect as it should.

**How can this be “operationalized”?  
Evidence of it happening well?**

# Reality and Problems? Team Learning

## Making It Work

- Everyone must pull in the same direction
- Teams must master the art of dialogue and discussion
- Conflict can still appear in good team learning
- BUT essentially a **unitary frame of reference**

How can this be “operationalized”?  
Evidence of it happening well?

## The Tricky Part

- practice, and consistency, no quick fixes
- boredom sets in
- open minded with one’s own views and the views of others

# Reality and Problems? Systems Thinking

## Making It Work

Management must

- understand concepts to put into place
- look at the whole picture, not “snap shots in time”
- provide the right workplace conditions

**How can this be  
“operationalized”?  
Evidence of it  
happening well?**

## The Tricky Part

- People find it hard to see the whole pattern of change
- takes time to see newly initiated ideas work
- easier to learn at an early stage rather than uncouple tangled messes

# Inhibitors to Becoming a Learning Organisation

- **Operational / “Fire-fighting”**
- **Short term fixes rather than long-term solutions**
- **How to focus on embedded systems and processes**
- **Reluctance to train (or invest in training)**
- **Too many hidden personal agendas**
- **Tension between top-down order and bottom up anarchy**
- **Management exasperation?**
- **The knee-jerk reaction to Theory Y failure?**

# LO Thought Questions

**“Training is obviously necessary and Development is fashionable” But, what do you train? Who should be trained? How would you assess training impact?**

**Discuss.**

**The concept of a LO is often vague and elusive. Demonstrating it in action is even more difficult . Almost anything could be presented to say that a LO exists and operates, yet many could also present instances to refute the proposition.” How would you know if it exists or does not?**

**Discuss.**