

## Action Research Culture to Support Organizational Learning

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### Why Culture is Important to learning in the workplace?

It emerged quite easily that the process of learning from experience is not painless to adopt. As Collison and Parcell put it, "You can't manage knowledge - nobody can. What you can do is to manage the environment." (Collison and Parcell, p. 22). Learning environment is likely to be different from many of the businesses actual climates. For example, Von Krogh et. al. (2000, Ch. 1) see the knowledge creation process as fragile (p. 8) and therefore must be supported by activities within an organizational context that enhances the knowledge-creating potential of the company. Overwhelming amount of literature has been published about Culture for Organizational Learning is and might need a review in itself. What follows is a limited list of values and norms, which, if they exist, support Lessons Learned Mechanisms, taking into account its design.

The following review describes three levels of culture analysis: personal attitudes, team spirit, and organizational values, along with the needed characteristics of these three levels.

Some researchers see the individual level as the most important aspect of learning and knowledge. Daugherty summarized this argument by stating that "people must choose to interact and share knowledge at a level over and above that required to get their job done." (Daugherty, 1999, p. 262). Creating a desire for knowledge is what Houschild, et. al. (2001) accept as leveraging the aspiration of members to promote the interest of their members in the success of other parts of the company. Collison and Parcell refer to seeking "help" as the requested attitude among employees. They also emphasize the need for developing active listening skills (Collison and Parcell, 2001 p. 46-47). Employees should be praised for seeking, sharing and creating knowledge. However, it is unlikely that the urge for knowledge-seeking will be effective without the

relevant skills. Members should practice knowledge seeking behaviors based on research-like skills such as interviewing, objective documentation and observation.

Another aspect of individual level of analysis is the variations in learning style. Teare and Dealty (1998, p. 55) suggest that variety of inputs reinforce the efficiency of group learning, “different learning style and preferences encourage individuals to learn from each other and play to the various strengths in any given group.” The way an individual perceives himself at his work and among his co-workers also plays an important element in his ability to learn. Holliday, in his research of school teachers, suggested five such conditions: positive feeling about himself as a person (Self); his ability to reach and understanding (Personal meaning); the capability to develop, apply, and measure the new ideas in the workplace (Action), the capacity to learn from teammates directly and indirectly (Collegiality); and a sense of ownership over the decisions and outcomes (empowerment) (Holliday, 1994, pp. 12-13, as brought by Matthews, 1999. p. 20). As learning in the workplace is a combination of reflection on experience and theoretical reasoning, Kolb’s model of experiential learning is also a relevant source (Kolb, 1976). Moreover, the idea that people are different in their learning styles and that each style has its advantages, raises the need for tolerance within team learning processes. Therefore, the willingness to learn is not only an individual characteristic but requires a team effort, too.

Team spirit might support learning or inhibit it. One facilitative force is Peter Senge (1990) and David Bohm’s (1990) dialogue, as distinct from discussion. According to Peter Senge, what counts most in team dialogue is the ability to tap the quality of ideas that are available only to those teams composed of members with skills that gives them access to their collective thinking (see Senge 1990, p.238-249). As summarized by Larry (1994), dialogue is the more creative, open-ended activity of a group thinking together. It is a conversation about possibility. In dialogue, people suspend their positions and probe others for their reasoning to discover new possibilities. Conversely, a discussion is about options,

actions and choice. In discussion, people take and hold positions, as in a debate.

Schein, another contributor to the team level of analysis, was among the first to write about learning culture and a culture of dialogue (Schein, 93). Three of his arguments for a culture of dialogue are worth mentioning. First, “dialogue is a necessary condition for effective group action, because only with a period of dialogue is it possible to determine whether or not the communication that is going is valid” (p. 42). Second, “in dialogue, we explore all complexities of thinking and language. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of implications or bias in our basic cognitive processes” (p. 43). Finally, “in dialogue the whole group is the object of learning and the members share the potential excitement of discovering, collectively, ideas that individually none of them might ever have thought of” (p. 44). Pursuant to the last claim, it should be added that if the whole organization is the object of learning, dialogue between teams becomes another level of interest, where shared mental models is likely to relate to cross-cultural differences.

However, as much as the culture of dialogue is important, it is difficult to induce dialogue in a workplace that is far away from a class-like setting. The kind of discussion in meetings occurring in organizations is usually managed under different norms. One should find a way to distinguish learning meetings from other discussions. Many of the problem-solving gatherings in organizations are handled in a discussion-debate style, as should be the case. Houschild, et. al. (2001) are also promoting the importance of dialogue, but this time between managers. While accepting that the workplace creates and reinforce a complex set of values, norms, attitudes, and learning opportunities, it is also inhibits learning processes. Thus, an organization “must ensure meaningful dialogue is established between management [...] and that messages given by the organization are regularly reinforced” (p. 55). This message implies two important aspects for LL mechanisms, one is creating a dialogue, which involves managers, and the second is the involvement of those

senior managers who can influence the organizational culture. Where senior management takes part in a LL meeting, the “dialogue boundaries” between layers and between departments can be eliminated, and “reproduction” of culture is more likely (p. 56). Finally, Bokeno and Grantt (2000) in a review of contemporary literature, summarized the characteristics of dialogue within teams as seeking and depending on “(a) a genuine care and respect for the other in interaction; (b) the ability and willingness to engage in reflection, both individually and collectively; and (c) the ability and willingness to speak authentically of one’s thoughts, ideas, and assumptions” (p. 241).

In the organizational level of analysis, a space for learning should be created as summarized in two publications. Englehardt and Simmons (2002) claim that a culture of sharing and experimentation, an appreciation of the tie between learning and change, an emphasis on learning with full access to the necessary organizational information and resources, and spirit of freedom to choose alternative paths for goals accomplishment are among the basic elements required for a learning organization (see also Gephart *et. al.*, 1996).

Lipshitz *et. al.* (2002) identified five norms that are likely to support valid information processing and commitment to corrective action. Transparency is defined as exposing one’s thought and actions to others in order to receive feedback. Integrity is defined as collecting and providing information regardless of its implications, which means the willingness to give and accept full and accurate feedback from and to others. Issue orientation is defined as the focus on the relevance of information regardless of the recipient or the source rank or position. This is sometimes referred to as “no-blame” culture. Inquiry is defined as persisting in investigation until a full understanding is achieved. Accountability is defined as assuming responsibility for both learning and implementing lessons learned.

It looks like these researchers are welcoming the adoption of research institute culture into business as if norms of scientific investigation were desired. However, there are some indications that cultural change is less an inevitable strategy than cultural adaptation. As

McDermott and O'Dell (2001) have found in their study, companies did not change their culture to match their knowledge management initiatives, but they adapted their approach to knowledge management to fit their culture. They did this by linking sharing knowledge to solving practical business problems; tying sharing knowledge to a preexisting core value; introducing knowledge management in a way that matches the organization's style; building on existing networks people use in their daily work; and encouraging peers and supervisors to exert pressure to share (p. 76). The last section of this article elaborates on aspects of LLM introduction to organizations.

In summary, there is no short list of words that can represent all aspects of LLM supporting culture. It is suggested, as a common language for this portfolio, that the term used to describe this culture will be **Action Research Culture**, to express the values and behaviors that support and promote the combination of research spirit within a business needs and constrains. An organization's action research values should facilitate scientific inquiry methods called "Learning Laboratory" by Leonard-Barton (Leonard-Barton, 1992) or, as Goh described it, a "culture of experimentation" (Goh, 1998). The effort to standardize data gathering and analysis is a way to promote its credibility in the eyes of the users and to foster its adoption by others, as well as easing its adaptation to the environment. In the group level, team spirit needs a culture of dialogue. Dialogue means candid sharing of information and interpretations to review other worldviews in a way that promotes understanding. It also means that participants can take risky and revealing actions for the sake of personal and organizational improvement. At the individual level, the most important aspect is the members' desire for knowledge. This should be accompanied by better skills to handle research-like data processing in the workplace. These values are difficult to find in an organization prior to intervention, which means the cultural gap has to be bridged. The challenge is to create a combination of elements, which facilitate support of LLMs by the individual, the teams, and the organization. There are many examples, in these articles and in others, of companies where one

can watch one or two of these values in vivo; however, there is no one example of organization that has adopted **all** these values.

Action Research Culture (ARC) might be developed differently within businesses in various societies. Although some segments of the Israeli economy were globalized in the last decade, many aspects of its business culture stayed local. Intercultural research shows some aspects, relevant to ARC that varies among nations. For example, GLOBE research project (House et. al. 2001) about leadership and culture developed nine dimensions for assessing a society's culture, some of which are relevant for elements of ARC, as follows [a] Uncertainty avoidance – which might push people to know more but also might inhibit the willingness to stay in a state of not-knowing; [b] societal collectivism, which supports sharing of knowledge vs. Power Distance, which inhibits un-hierarchical open dialogue; [c] In-Group collectivism and Cohesiveness, which might facilitate within team learning efforts vs. Individualism, which might enhance unhealthy competitiveness; [d] performance orientation, which might support learning efforts where knowledge is perceived as relevant to improvement; and [e] need of achievement and human orientation, which refers to the belief of how much trust can be developed in the work place, as well as the centrality of affiliative motive (see also Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; McClelland, 1985). As all these dimensions might be part of a society's culture and are likely to influence an organization's ARC, general conclusions should be developed based on research made within the context of that business's society.

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