

# Learning Organizations: An Introduction\*

## What is a learning organization?

A learning organization is an organization in which people at all levels – staff, Board members, and volunteers – continually, deliberately work individually and together to improve their capacity to perform and to reach a shared vision. Learning organizations establish and maintain the *habit* of learning.

## What are some characteristics of a learning organization?

- It recognizes the need to continually renew, re-invent, and re-energize itself.
- It is flexible, innovative, and creative—able to respond to changing needs and external challenges and to take advantage of opportunities.
- Its people accept and adapt to changes and new ideas—the fear of change has been minimized.
- It works toward a shared vision.
- Its people have a shared “mental model” – an internal image of the world, how things work, and what can and cannot be accomplished.
- It promotes regular and rapid information exchange among people at all levels within the organization.
- It involves people at all levels in decision making, and announces final decisions promptly and publicly.
- People’s personal goals and the organization’s mission are consistent and interdependent.
- Everyone learns together in order to continuously improve organizational performance.
- It encourages wise risk-taking and allows failure. Its people know that we must risk failure to achieve a high level of success.
- It examines its successes and its failures to ensure that it learns from them.
- Its people work in teams.
- Its people use “systems thinking” – they consider the big picture. They look for interrelationships and for what is best for the organization as a whole, not just themselves or their unit.
- It encourages and rewards the raising of difficult questions.

## Why should we want to be a learning organization?

**It helps the organization survive, thrive, and grow:** In a changing and challenging environment, learning organizations perform better, serve their clients and communities better, and are more sustainable than other organizations.

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**It is rewarding for staff, Board, and volunteers:** learning is personally satisfying, and people feel satisfied and fulfilled when their performance is outstanding.

**It benefits clients and community:** In the long run, the learning organization is more effective, more lasting, and wiser in its use of resources than other organizations.

Here are some of the frequently identified benefits of being a learning organization:

- It increases employee interest and motivation.
- It leads to more creative ideas from people at all levels.
- It helps employees become productive more quickly in new jobs.
- It increases teamwork and reduces unproductive conflict.
- It works hard to develop and maintain trust among people at all levels, because it understands that trust is an essential characteristic of a learning organization.
- It increases communication across components and levels of employees—and reduces what the isolation of work units that is called “siloeing.”
- It reduces the need for close supervision.
- It makes the organization more productive when the leader is away—because everyone takes responsibility for him/herself and for the organization.
- It regularly analyzes the external environment to identify changes requiring organizational adjustments or responses.
- It helps potential problems get identified and addresses earlier.
- It helps the organization learn from experience, so mistakes and problems are less likely to happen again.

### **What actions are most important in establishing and maintaining a learning organization?**

1. Begin by creating awareness about the importance of personal learning. Be sure everyone understands why you want to be a learning organization.
2. Work together to decide what the organization will look like as a learning organization—develop revised values and norms as well as new systems and procedures. Be sure there is a shared vision.
3. Prepare a shared plan for implementation, with major actions identified, needed systems and procedures specified. Include timelines and responsibilities. Treat this like a new, high priority project, not something to be done “when there is time.”
4. Create an empowering environment that encourages learning, questioning, openness, and analysis throughout the organization. A learning organization involves people at all levels in decision making—which occurs only if people feel confident that can question strategies or proposed decisions without fear of reprisal.
5. Make resources—including time—available to create and maintain the learning organization. Recognize that learning takes time and effort. You may need to serve slightly fewer clients, or make a small reduction in the number of advocacy issues addressed during the transition

period. You will also need to make time for formal training and informal learning sessions on a regular basis.

6. Be sure that leaders and supervisors throughout the organization are actively supporting the learning environment—encouraging teamwork, questioning, and broad involvement in decision making.
7. Identify ways to reward innovation, creativity, and extra effort on the part of people at all levels. Build in informal and formal recognition and appreciation.
8. Regularly evaluate your progress as an organization and as a learning organization. Set objectives for both program and internal performance and evaluate progress and problems. Use the results to agree together how to continuously do better. Remember, learning never ends. You will never be the perfect learning organization—but you will get better and better.
9. If you are making the transition to a learning organization from a more traditional organization, don't move slowly, but don't expect people to change instantly. Look for a balance between change and stability, and give people time to learn a new way of working. Provide a lot of support and encouragement during the process.
10. Document and share your process—so you can be a model for other nonprofit organizations.

### **What is the Board's role in the learning organization?**

Board members are among the organization's leaders. They need to be leaders of the learning organization as well. The Board needs to actively support the establishment and continuation of a learning organization. Often the Board adopts some specific practices to ensure continuous learning. For example:

- Boards can take seriously their responsibility of program oversight, asking for regular program review and evaluation.
- The Board can participate in Board development sessions to increase its skills in various Board areas of responsibility, from the legal responsibilities of Board members to fundraising.
- Boards can set annual objectives for their own work, and regularly review their progress.
- Committees can establish objectives and work plans for the year, and review their own performance.
- Someone can serve as an observer at meetings, providing feedback on how well the meeting accomplished its objectives and whether and how the meeting process could be improved.
- At the end of each meeting, the Chair can go around the table and ask each Board member to comment about what s/he learned at the meeting, satisfaction with the process, what s/he would like to see others do differently in the future, and what s/he will do differently.

### **Are our clients a part of the learning organization?**

Yes. A learning organization regularly asks its clients and community for feedback on past performance and input on future priorities and strategies. Your clients should understand *that* you are a learning organization and *why* you are a learning organization.

Often, a learning organization finds that its values and focus on learning and continuous improvement lead clients and beneficiaries to adopt similar values and behaviors. The people you train or the children you serve will begin to share your approach. They will start to expect more of the organization—and more of themselves.

## **Where can I find out more about learning organizations?**

Here are a few references that are appropriate for nonprofit as well as for-profit entities, though some were developed for the corporate world.

Chawla and Renesch, Eds., *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*. Portland, Oregon: Productivity Press, 1995. See especially the chapter by Charles Handy, "Managing the Dream."

Gerard, "Learning Organizations." Can be downloaded from [http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/MENG/MEAB/learning\\_organisation](http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/MENG/MEAB/learning_organisation).

Gozdz, "Creating Learning Organizations through Core Competence in Community Building." Revised version of a chapter in *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business*. New Leaders Press, 1995.

McInerney, Nyquist, Santos, Silsbee, and Faerman, "Learning Organizations," 1995. Available at <http://www.leader-values.com/Content/detail.asp?ContentDetailID=186>

"Why a Learning Organization?" Report of responses collected by Richard Karash, 1994-2002. Available at <http://world.std.com/~lo/>.

Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth, and Smith, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. Revised Edition, 2006.

Society for Organizational Learning website, <http://www.solonline.org/>. Offers a number of books and other materials from Senge and others.