

Adapting for Success: The Practice of Organisational Learning

EDITED BY LAURA SLATER



Adapting for Success: The Practice of Organisational Learning

is published by Ark Group



UK/EUROPE/ASIA OFFICE

Ark Conferences Ltd
6-14 Underwood Street
London N1 7JQ
United Kingdom
Tel +44 (0)20 7566 5792
Fax +44 (0)20 7324 2373
publishing@ark-group.com

NORTH AMERICA OFFICE

Ark Group Inc
4408 N. Rockwood Drive
Suite 150
Peoria IL 61614
United States
Tel +1 309 495 2853
Fax +1 309 495 2858
publishingna@ark-group.com

AUSTRALIA/NZ OFFICE

Ark Group Australia Pty Ltd
Main Level
83 Walker Street
North Sydney NSW 2060
Australia
Tel +61 1300 550 662
Fax +61 1300 550 663
aga@arkgroupasia.com

Head of Content Strategy

Fiona Tucker
fiona.tucker@wilmington.co.uk

Reports Content Manager

Helen Roche
helen.roche@ark-group.com

Assistant Editor

Laura Slater
laura.slater@ark-group.com

UK/Europe/Asia enquiries

Irene Pardo
irene.pardo@wilmington.co.uk

US enquiries

Daniel Smallwood
dsmallwood@ark-group.com

Australia/NZ enquiries

Steve Oesterreich
aga@arkgroupasia.com

ISBN: 978-1-78358-143-6 (hard copy)
978-1-78358-144-3 (PDF)

Copyright

The copyright of all material appearing within this publication is reserved by the authors and Ark Conferences 2014. It may not be reproduced, duplicated or copied by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher.

Online bookshop

www.ark-group.com/bookshop

Adapting for Success: The Practice of Organisational Learning

EDITED BY LAURA SLATER



Contents

Executive summary	v
Chapter 1: Transforming individual learning into organisational change.....	1
Introduction	1
Individual learning	3
Validating learning.....	7
Structuring learning	10
Approving learning	12
Organisational change.....	13
Conclusions.....	18
Chapter 2: Organisational learning and the impact on organisational performance	21
The learning organisation	22
How organisational learning impacts organisational flexibility and adaptation	23
Why is continued development so imperative?	23
How to create an organisational culture that facilitates learning	24
Why is it important for the employee to understand the organisational culture?	25
How can an organisational learning culture be enhanced?	25
6 barriers to organisational learning.....	26
Conclusion	28
Chapter 3: How can you build training and learning programmes to support OL?	29
Balancing the needs of the individual and the organisation	30
Developing your people	33
The relationship between the individual, the team, the leader, and the organisation	36
Conclusion: A simple solution	39

Chapter 4: Learning in temporary organisations – Lessons learned from event planning	41
Most important decisions are made early	42
You only have one shot to get it right.....	43
Conclusion.....	44
 Chapter 5: Adapt, innovate, or die – Replacing the learning organisation with agile innovation leadership	47
The problem of TLO as a vanity product.....	48
The problems of TLO as method of paying attention	49
Stan McChrystal, Al Qaeda, and OODA	51
Conclusion: From TLO as a concept to agile innovation leadership as a practice.....	54
 Chapter 6: Learning for the long view – A case study in enabling learning to deliver breakthrough innovation in the offshore diamond mining industry	57
Introduction	57
Background context to the learning challenge	60
The importance of prior learning in identifying opportunity.....	62
Getting to grips with the real problem.....	65
An unreasonable challenge becomes a reality	66
Lessons learned in accelerating the delivery of deliberate strategic innovation	68
 Chapter 7: The importance of leadership in learning organisations.....	81

Executive summary

CORPORATE INVESTMENT in learning and development is on the rise; global business currently spends a collective \$130 billion on employee training programmes.¹ Yet research from Bersin by Deloitte shows that less than half of these programmes are run by a senior staff member, and fewer than 45 per cent of companies have a written business plan for learning in place.² Without the underlying structures and leadership support for learning and development programmes, companies should expect a poor return on their investment in their staff. On the other hand, businesses that implement successful organisational learning programmes will not only create a more knowledgeable, productive workforce, but will become a more flexible, adaptable organisation as a result.

Organisational learning first developed as a concept in the 1990s, based around Peter M. Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, and the associated ideas have been soundly thrashed out in a multitude of publications, training courses, and presentations since that time. Businesses have responded by ploughing money into staff training – but have often failed to address what organisational learning really means in practice. While CEOs and senior management have enthusiastically embraced the concept of organisational learning, department heads, team leaders, work groups, and individuals are sent on training days without any concept of how their attendance will benefit the wider organisation, and little idea of sharing their day-to-day trials and triumphs beyond the confines of their team.

Organisational learning begins with the individual – but it should not end there. When companies invest in training individuals or individual teams, they are – in theory – strengthening the organisation as a whole. However, knowledge serves no purposes if it is not used, and training programmes serve no purpose if employees forget what they have learned as soon as they return to the office environment. For an organisation to 'learn', structures must exist to support the capture and dissemination of knowledge beyond individual teams and work groups. For an organisation to *have learned*, it must also be capable of putting this learning into practice. The latest generation to enter the workforce has grown up with interactive, mobile, 24/7 technologies – this needs to be reflected both in the learning opportunities offered to employees, and in the

systems and processes for storing and sharing information employed by the organisation as a whole.

The link between organisational learning and leadership cannot be overstated. For an organisation to learn, there needs to be a culture of collaboration, trust, and respect and this starts with management. A learning organisation cannot afford leaders who are ‘stuck in their ways’, relying on past experience and old successes to inform new problems. Rather, managers must encourage and motivate staff to acquire knowledge beyond the initial induction or training stage. They must support the integration of lessons learned – during temporary projects or L&D activities; from successes and failures – into the fabric of the organisation by encouraging every employee to feel that his or her ideas will be listened to, fairly considered, and (where applicable) will be acted upon. A learning culture such as this fosters employee engagement, leading to better performance and higher staff retention. Moreover, leaders in a learning organisation must appreciate their own opportunities to learn not just from other managers, but also from their employees.

In order to maintain a competitive advantage, a learning organisation must also recognise the need adapt in anticipation of *future* threats. From the management down, a learning organisation must be unafraid of new challenges and disruptive technologies – because fringe technologies today may become mainstream tomorrow. Accurately predicting tomorrow’s problems and designing innovative solutions to address them today is the only way an organisation will outperform the competition in the future. Anticipatory adaptation must be embraced – even when this means abandoning tried and tested work processes that have been invested in heavily over the years.

This report brings together the knowledge and experience of experts in knowledge management, training, L&D, and organisational development. It presents an overview of organisational learning as a concept, and moves on to discuss such essential topics as transforming individual learning into organisational change; how to develop a business culture that supports organisational learning; building L&D initiatives that encourage OL and provide a holistic learning experience; and aligning learning initiatives with overall company goals. The report also considers what traditional businesses can learn from temporary organisations – like events teams – which have no pre-existing culture or infrastructure, and which must of necessity develop processes, relationships, and trust very quickly. Such temporary organisations can teach us a good deal about working across disciplinary and organisational boundaries, sharing best practice skills, and maintaining employee motivation as they ‘come down’ from the exhilaration of working on an important project.

In a rapidly changing, 21st-century workplace, the speed with which an organisation learns, and its ability to adapt to new situations faster than the

competition, are critical to survival. A true learning organisation is constantly on the watch for change, whether this comes from within (M&A, financial difficulties, expansion) or from outside (increasing competition, the economic downturn, the rise of new technologies). For an organisation to succeed in the long-term, it must be flexible enough to easily integrate lessons learned into the existing framework and processes of the organisation. The success stories of tomorrow will be written by those companies that learn to adapt not just to what has happened, but to what *will* happen.

References

1. O'Leonard, K., The corporate learning factbook(r) 2014: Benchmarks, trends, and analysis of the U.S. training market, Bersin by Deloitte, January 2014, www.bersin.com/library or www.bersin.com/factbook.
2. Mallon, D., Clarey, J., and Vickers, M., The high-impact learning organization series, Bersin & Associates, September 2012, www.bersin.com/library or www.bersin.com/hilo.

