

Characteristics of Learning Organizations

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Approach

I reviewed literature from a variety of academic disciplines to develop a deeper understanding of how people and groups learn, think, and make decisions. I extended that baseline understanding into a journalistic consideration of the learning characteristics of my own institution as it enacts large-scale change.

Key Quotation

“Organizations shape the way experience unfolds and the way in which it is observed and comprehended. They define the networks through which information flows and reinforce or reduce the cleavages of conflict. They create and maintain the goals and expectations that calibrate aspirations. They are systems of rules, routines, capabilities, and identities that both resist and record the lessons of experience.” (March 2011)

Literature Cited

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Morgan, Gareth. 2006. *Images of Organization*. Updated ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

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General Characteristics




Knowledge Acquisition and <i>Adaptation</i>	Participation and <i>Meaning</i>	Knowledge Creation and <i>Emergence</i>
Routine Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none">Gain knowledge from an authoritative source...so as to efficiently exploit that knowledge to solve routine problemsMay learn to understand or learn to imitateMust adapt to new ideas and changing conditions 	Hard Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none">Gain knowledge through participation in community, which crosses proficiency levelsStories and models are vessels for deep knowledge, but also for meaningDecision-making processes are as much about constructing meaning as they are about outcomes 	Novel Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none">Novelty requires a shift from exploiting existing knowledge to exploring new ideasMost novel ideas are bad, and they must be judged by experimentation rather than past experienceThink of the organization within a supersystem 
Lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none">Replication of success results in steady improvement...toward suboptimal solutionsCompetence and reliability trap us into ignoring better alternativesVulnerable to disruption	Lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none">Experience itself is complex and confusingOur stories and models allow for interpretive flexibilityWe have to account for conflict within organizations	Lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none">Novelty may be a consequence of adaptive inefficiencyThe key move is to shift from controlling everything to enabling self-organizing and unpredictable change

Image Sources

Nest: <http://www.iwallscreen.com/highres/1280x720-baby-birds-in-the-nest/>

Geese: <http://www.conservator.ca/2014/09/majestic-migration/>

Starlings: <http://www.laboiteverte.fr/murmuration-plastique-dalain-delorme/>

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Local Conclusions

- The move from a **local maximum** to a **global optimum** is a negotiation, not an appropriation
 - Balance environmental fit with standard rules – combinatorial novelty
 - Build deep proficiency
 - Use growth mindsets rather than fixed mindsets
 - Beware of reliability bias
 - Learn from iterated experience, and not just initial theory
- “Comprehensive” change necessarily involves **meaning, identity, and complexity**
 - Machine metaphors are insufficient – story and purpose matter
 - Identity is performed, and it is situational and malleable
 - Organizations are pluralistic, not unitary
 - Organizations do not exist separately from their environments
 - Shift from control to enabling emergence – increase in both audacity and humility

Further Information

Please contact me at gchapman@utexas.edu for further information or discussion.