



IMPROVE ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE BY CREATING A LEARNING CULTURE

In an age driven by technology and information, the rate at which organizations learn may be the only sustainable competitive advantage.

--Ray Strata

WHAT IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

A learning organization is one in which employees continually collect information, reflect on it, and integrate the findings to improve the performance of the organization. In other words, an organization that has a learning culture is continuously learning from its own experience. A learning organization will always be just as smart as the individuals who comprise it. Therefore, a successful learning organization will be one in which people continuously improve themselves, their programs and services, and their results.

FOUR REASONS TO CREATE A LEARNING CULTURE:

1. **Efficiency & Productivity:** Sharing information about what works saves time and enhances performance.
2. **Innovative Edge:** The speed and rigor with which we try, fail, readjust and deploy is a critical competitive advantage.
3. **Strategic Alignment:** When individual members are aligned, the quality of decision-making and the ability to execute are increased.
4. **Retention of talent:** Challenge, learning and impact are profound motivators of knowledge workers.

SOUNDS GREAT! WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

- Over-emphasis on speed and action can trump reflection and learning.
- Lack of encouragement and support for experimentation prompts people to stick to what's familiar.
- Focusing on flaws and what doesn't work rather than exploring what's possible and what we can do to achieve it.
- Avoidance of disagreement, which naturally arises when discussing errors.
- Lack of goals, incentives and processes that encourage learning.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS AND ACTIONS OF A LEARNING CULTURE?

1. LEADERSHIP THAT CHAMPIONS LEARNING:

- Sets learning and performance goals and monitors progress.

- Acts as a role model by visibly demonstrating behaviors that create a supportive learning environment. (See list below under “Behaviors that Support a Learning Environment.”)
- Defines specific roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for collecting, analyzing and sharing information across the organization.
- Provides incentives that reward learning behavior and risk taking.
- Focuses on continuous improvement – constantly figuring out ways to do things better.
- Develops ongoing opportunities for employee growth and development.
- Ensures employees are involved and can influence key decisions that impact their work.
- Leads meaningful conversations about the organization’s work and its impact.

2. SPECIFIC LEARNING PROCESSES AND PRACTICES:

- Create methods for suggesting new strategies, approaches, and ideas.
- After an event, review what went well and define how to improve future efforts.
- Use data rather than assumptions as the foundation for decision-making.
- Monitor changes in the external environment, collect information from competitors and clients, and use this data for future planning.
- Develop technology platforms that capture knowledge and make it accessible to others.
- Create regular opportunities for sharing successes, failures, best practices, and what people are learning.

3. BEHAVIORS THAT SUPPORT A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

- Giving authentic feedback – up, down, and sideways.
- Encouraging action (Using a “try it, fix it” approach.)
- Being curious about other members of the team and what they are learning in their jobs.
- Engaging in active questioning and exploring alternative viewpoints.
- Listening when someone disagrees or raises negative consequences rather than “shooting the messenger.”
- Constantly working to improve knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence.
- Recognizing each other’s strengths and weaknesses and using the unique contributions of each person on the team.
- Examining “sacred cows,” including the models and assumptions that are frequently used.
- Admitting mistakes.

EXPERIMENTS TO TRY:

- Organize your next staff meeting around important questions (to which there might not be clear answers) as opposed to report outs and updates.
- Allocate resources to learning.
- Allocate 5-10% of each person’s time to “innovate” or work with another group or colleague (outside of regular responsibilities).
- Use a learning style assessment to identify and discuss different ways of getting work done (e.g. 5 dynamics, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.)
- Use the above list “elements and actions of a learning culture” to audit your organization’s learning practices.

THE BOTTOM LINE: *Curiosity and eagerness to learn are the keys to success.*