

by **Monica Pauls and Nilima Sonpal-Valias**

The rehabilitation field has witnessed massive changes in the last two decades, from philosophical shifts in the societal roles of people with developmental disabilities to practical changes in service delivery models. Combined with greater accountability and service demands, these changes have put tremendous pressure on organizations striving to provide quality service and care while minimizing staff burnout.

Change is often perceived as risky, intimidating and sometimes even threatening. But change is the only way to discover “best practice” strategies and improve organizational performance. One way an organization can successfully adapt to and manage change is to become a “learning organization” (LO). This *Review* describes what an LO is, discusses the benefits of having a “culture of learning” and addresses some key elements needed to create such an organizational culture.

What Exactly is a “Learning Organization”?

Senge defines a learning organization as “an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (1990, p.14). The goal of an LO is not to limit its learning to simply *survive* external demands, but to learn by continually looking for more effective strategies so that it becomes capable of defining and *controlling* its own destiny in spite of changing demands (Senge, 1990).

Learning at an organizational level depends on internal communication, team building, and valuing the ideas of all people. Consequently, an LO is built on the foundation of trust, teamwork, coordination and cooperation (Boyett & Boyett, 2000). It has a vision which is shared and valued by all members and provides direction for everyday practices. Staff recognize the benefits of open and honest communication through formal and informal mechanisms, across all levels and in all areas of the organization. Each member shares his or her own knowledge and experience with others so that individual knowledge becomes part of everyday work structures, routines and norms. As a result, organizational decisions and actions are responsive to the daily realities of all employees, and build on the wealth of knowledge drawn from all individuals (Davies & Nutley, 2000).

The Benefits of Having a “Culture of Learning”

Organizational culture is the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices of all members in the organization. When organizations make learning a central part of their strategy for survival and growth, learning becomes part of their organizational culture. Sharing of information and knowledge is encouraged and supported through organizational policies, systems and structures, and becomes a routine part of work life. As ideas spread, employees become more confident and have a stronger belief in their own abilities to learn and adapt to change (Petrides, 2002). The ability to initiate and apply learning builds competency. Once individual capacity to change and grow increases, the organization as a whole also begins to change and grow. This results in improved services, higher levels of organizational performance and successful adaptation to a changing environment (Hartley & Allison, 2002).

Key Points

- Change is a necessary prerequisite for innovation and improved performance.
- Becoming a “learning organization” (LO) is one way to successfully manage change.
- In an LO, the organization supports individuals to share ideas, knowledge and experiences to define new structures, routines and norms.
- “Double-loop” learning is critical to becoming an LO. Constant evaluation of practices and sharing of new learning lead to improved performance and growth.
- Organizational leaders play a key role in creating a culture of learning.

Implications for Leaders

- Address how people learn in the workplace. Provide resources and support for risk-taking and “learning by doing.”
- Encourage curiosity. Support critical thinking and professional development.
- Facilitate information sharing. Enable staff to participate in organization-wide teams and groups, and provide tangible support and recognition for the participation.
- Foster an environment of trust. Practise open communication and value the contributions of all members.

How to Create a Learning Organization

Organizational learning cannot occur without change. Becoming an LO involves the participation of all employees in a continuous process where goals, policies, structures and norms of practice are constantly evaluated and modified in an effort to develop innovative models of service (Davies & Nutley, 2000).

A critical part of creating an LO is to enable “double-loop learning,” i.e., the process where individuals evaluate the success of a new strategy, identify what has been learned, and assess what to do with the new knowledge (Davies & Nutley, 2000).

The VVRI's transition to a holistic service model is an example of double-loop learning, resulting from questioning how services were traditionally provided (i.e., community services for daytime needs and residential services for evening/overnight needs). The integration of these two services required staff to “unlearn” some established practices and fundamental assumptions, resulting in redefining organizational goals and structures, and a new way of providing quality service.

Organizational leaders and decision-makers play a key role in creating the environment needed to establish a culture of learning. Below are some critical strategies for leaders to understand and implement.

Address how people learn in the workplace. Many people learn best by “doing” (Conner & Clawson, 2002), and progressive organizations realize that failure is often a precursor to learning (Davies & Nutley, 2000). Provide employees with the resources and support to try new ideas without fear of retribution. Resources may include dedicating time for thorough planning, connecting with a mentor, providing coverage for current duties so that staff can devote their attention to implementing and monitoring new practices, and encouraging staff not to quit in the face of momentary setbacks.

Encourage curiosity. New ideas typically do not occur in isolation from human contact. Provide staff with learning resources and professional development opportunities, especially those encouraging critical thinking and teaching about approaches and practices in other areas. Enable staff to participate in interagency groups. Allow time for learning, and recognize and

reward those who use learning opportunities effectively.

Facilitate information sharing. Individual knowledge can only contribute to a culture of learning if it is shared, interpreted in new ways and assimilated into organizational processes (Edmondson, 2002). Leaders in an LO appreciate that front-line employees have the most accurate and complete knowledge of what works best and where the flaws are (Davies & Nutley, 2000). Enable these holders of “tacit knowledge” to participate in organization-wide teams and task forces. Design organizational systems to provide tangible support and recognition for such participation. Consistent application of this strategy will result in the natural development of networks where information is shared informally from day to day (Edmondson, 2002).

Foster an environment of trust. A deciding factor for many people on whether or not to share or implement a new idea is its acceptance by their peers or those in more senior positions (Rappolt & Tassone, 2002). Create trust by practising open and honest communication, encouraging people to go “out on a limb” with new ideas, and sincerely valuing the contributions of *all* members. Leaders recognize that if they allow the thinking of any *one* group (including senior management) to dominate, it can silence new (potentially successful) ideas, and lead to organizational stagnation and even death (Schein, 1992).

Conclusion

There are numerous examples where extraordinary growth and success has resulted from organizational cultures of learning (Senge, 1990). A learning culture embraces change, values innovation, and sees new opportunities. But creating an LO is not a quick answer to stagnation, lack of communication or dissatisfied staff. The challenges of creating an LO and some drawbacks of working in a culture of learning will be addressed in a future *Review*.

Organizations that value lifelong learning and employee well-being ultimately provide improved services. Innovative service models and teams that can “change with the times” instil confidence in funders and consumers. These relationships, along with quality service, effectively define long-term success for non-profit organizations.

References

- Boyett, J.H. & Boyett, J.T. (2000). The necessary conditions for a learning culture [Online]. Available: <http://www.jboyett.com/learning.htm> [2003, April].
- Conner, M.L. & Clawson, J.G. (2002). Creating a learning culture [Online]. Available: http://agelesslearner.com/articles/lc_connerclawson_tc600.html [2003, April].
- Davies, H.T.O. & Nutley, S.M. (2000, April). Developing learning organisations in the new NHS. *BMJ*, 320, 998–1001.
- Edmondson, A.C. (2002, March-April). The local and variegated nature of learning in organizations: A group-level perspective. *Organizational Science*, 13(2), 128-146.
- Hartley, J. & Allison, M. (2002). Good, Better, Best? Inter-organizational learning in a network of local authorities. *Public Management Review*, 4(1), 101-118.
- Petrides, L.A. (2002, Spring). Organizational learning and the case for knowledge-based systems. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 113, 69–84.
- Rappolt, S. & Tassone, M. (2002). How rehabilitation therapists gather, evaluate and implement new knowledge. *The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 22, 170–180.
- Schein, E.H. (1992). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P.M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.