Creating a learning organisation in higher education

Jennifer Rowley

The author
Jennifer Rowley is at the School of Management and Social Sciences, Edge Hill University College, Ormskirk.

Abstract
The need for organisations to survive in a changing environment has led to the development of the concept of the learning organisation. A learning organisation is an organisation that facilitates learning for all of its members, and thereby continuously transforms itself. The organisation needs to create a climate in which experiential learning is managed effectively throughout the workplace, and in which individual learning is harnessed to achieve organisational learning. In higher education institutions, although they may have a learning culture, the creation of a learning organisation is dependent on embedding learning in the management processes of the organisation by extending the focus on learning from the classroom and the research laboratory to the wider organisation, so that the organisation creates and disseminates knowledge that informs the development of the organisation. The article considers the nature of a learning organisation, and how such an organisation might be created, in the context of higher education.

What is a learning organisation?
Pedler et al. (1988) proposed the following definition of a learning company:

An organisation which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.

This definition has two important elements:
(1) individual learning; and
(2) organisational learning and transformation.

A learning organisation concerns itself with individual learning, but this alone is not sufficient. Individual learning must be harnessed to create organisational learning. Pedler et al. (1988) elaborate further on the concept of a learning organisation:

A learning organisation is one which:
• has a climate in which individual members are encouraged to learn and to develop their full potential;
• extends this learning culture to include customers, suppliers and other significant stakeholders;
• makes human resource development strategy central to business policy;
• is a continuous process of organisational transformation.

Why?
The purpose of the organisational transformation that is achieved through a learning organisation is to enable the organisation to search for new ideas, new problems and new opportunities for learning from which competitive advantage can be culled in an increasingly competitive world. In general, and specifically in the context of higher education, the world is changing, markets are changing, and political and legal contexts shift. In addition, information technology has increased the speed of communication and therefore has impacted on the ability of organisations to monitor and respond to their customer’s requirements. In such an environment, organisations and their employees must know how to change. According to Salaman and Butler (1994):

in order to change appropriately they must be able to analyse themselves, their processes, structures and their environments, be able to identify preferred and appropriate responses, and be able to implement them.

In other words, organisations must be able to learn and to learn from their learning.
Without this ability organisations will not be able to exercise appropriate choice in respect of structure, process, culture, product and, sooner or later, they will fail. Higher education organisations have been concerned to create a learning community in which both staff and students learn through their experience in the teaching and learning environment, coupled with appropriate exposure to scholarship and research. So, it might be supposed that the culture in higher education might be sympathetic to the creation of a learning organisation. How might we capitalise on this learning culture to develop a learning organisation that learns from its environment and changes accordingly? Here we first explore the general approach to the creation of a learning organisation, and then reflect on the relationship between individual and organisational learning in a learning organisation.

How?

How can a learning organisation be created? Whilst the need to learn and change is indisputable, there is general agreement (e.g. Dale, 1994) that there is no right model of a learning organisation and indeed those who seek a cookbook approach will be disappointed. A learning organisation cannot be defined in terms of specific structures or cultures, or in terms of normative models of good practice. Processes and values are central. A learning organisation works to create values, practices and procedures in which learning and working are synonymous throughout the organisation. Learning is a core part of all operations. Surely, there can be few higher education institutions that do not meet these criteria, but what is the next step?

The learning organisation is elusive and there are no recipes for success. Megginson and Pedler (1992) identify some necessary but not sufficient conditions for the creation of a learning company. These conditions are:

- a corporate learning strategy;
- participative policy making;
- information technology harnessed to inform and empower people to ask questions and take decisions based on available data;
- formative accounting, where accounting systems are designed to assist learning from decisions;
- internal exchange;
- flexibility is rewarded;
- front-line workers are expected to be and are used as environmental scanners;
- inter-company learning takes place, where learning is not restricted to the organisation, but extends to organisations which are suppliers, customers, or even competitors;
- a climate is created which supports learning;
- self-development is for all members of the organisation.

In summary, a learning organisation is one in which the learning strategy is more than a human resource or staff development strategy – it is a core component of all operations. This is only achieved by attention to both individual learning and organisational learning. I would argue that whilst higher education institutions are committed to individual learning and participative policy making, and have a climate which supports learning, some of the other necessary characteristics are often less well developed. How many higher education institutions can claim a corporate learning strategy, formative accounting and appropriate harnessing of information technology to support management decision making?

How can individual learning be harnessed to create corporate learning? First, it is necessary to consider the nature of individual learning.

How is individual learning managed to create a learning organisation?

Mumford (1994) underlines the importance of individual learners in building a learning organisation:

The learning organisation depends absolutely on the skills, approaches and commitment of individuals of their own learning.

An essential ingredient in the learning organisation is the way that the organisation seeks to improve the capacity of individuals to recognise and take advantage of learning opportunities. It is important to emphasise that all members of the organisation need to participate in individual learning, and that their managers need to view this as a central responsibility. Higher education institutions embrace a wide number of different professional groups and there is a real challenge in encouraging individual learning across all of these groups, including not only academic staff, but also library staff, cleaners, and
administrators. In addition, many institutions are moving towards the shamrock organisation where there are core, contract and flexible workers. Responsibility for individual learning for contract and flexible workers must be shared between the organisation and the individual, but even with this acknowledgement there is an in-built tension between commitment to support the individual learning of these groups and the long-term benefits that such learning may bring to the organisation.

The learning organisation needs a process for supporting people in the identification and exploitation of learning opportunities. This is a shared role for management development advisors, trainers and educators, in partnership with line managers. Indeed there are a number of helpers in the learning process: the boss, the grand boss, mentors, colleagues, subordinates and clients for projects. All of their roles need to be clearly defined. Equally important is the relationship between off-the-job learning opportunities and on-the-job opportunities. Learners need to learn from both success and failure. Individuals need support in enhancing their ability to evaluate experience and not just to repeat it. In this context, managers need to take responsibility for the performance of others. Mumford (1980) suggests that managers who are good developers of their staff:

- draw out the strengths and weaknesses of their staff rather than suppressing them;
- reward their people both materially and psychologically for the risks that they take in attempting to develop themselves;
- positively seek to identify learning opportunities for staff;
- give personal time to the development of staff - for example in reviewing and analysing activity associated with learning;
- involve their subordinates in some of their own tasks and do not simply delegate tasks that they do not wish to do themselves;
- share some of their problems and anxieties with their staff as one way of enhancing staff development;
- listen rather than talk;
- do not seek to shape individuals as replicas of themselves;
- take risks on the desired results of their departments in pursuit of relevant learning opportunities for their people.

In order to exhibit these characteristics, managers need to develop appropriate adult-to-adult relationships, and the language and behaviour that is used in these relationships. Individual learning, then, to a significant extent rests on the relationships that managers collectively within an organisation have with their staff. Higher education institutions need to reflect on the relationships that managers of both academic and non-academic staff form with their staff and, in general, attention needs to be given to appropriate management development.

While relationships are important, these need to be supported and reinforced by a wider orientation towards learning throughout the organisation. This impacts on broader issues of culture and structure. Salaman and Butler (1994) identify some of the potential blockages in striving towards a learning organisation. These include:

- formal learning on training programmes that conflicts with informal day-to-day learning;
- sectionalism and professional specialism which may be used to defend the status quo;
- learning may be inextricably linked with the power and control associated with knowledge and information in organisations;
- group loyalties and consensus can conflict with the openness and challenges necessary to achieve learning and change.

These barriers clearly need attention and management in the development of a learning organisation.

Taking the alternative perspective, Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) offer one insight into the conditions under which learning develops. Their study was focused on the ability of a number of British firms to manage strategic change and to assess the outcome of competitive performance. In the process of this study they identified five key environmental variables which were handled differently by higher-performing firms. These are: environmental assessment, leading change, viewing human resources as assets and liabilities and achieving coherence. Successful management of all of these variables can be viewed as adopting a problem-solving approach in that good quality data, good analysis and open discussion are central to this approach. Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) emphasise the
importance of maintaining the ability of a company to learn under regular scrutiny. Key tasks for managers are in the area of reconstruction and adaptation of the knowledge base.

Conclusion

The need for organisations to survive in a changing environment has led to the development of the concept of the learning organisation. A learning organisation is an organisation that facilitates learning for all of its members, and thereby continuously transforms itself. Although there is general agreement that there is "no right model" and learning organisations are created through attention to values and processes, individual learning is a central component of the learning organisation. The organisation needs to create a climate in which experiential learning is managed effectively throughout the workplace, and in which individual learning is harnessed to achieve organisational learning. In higher education institutions, although they may have a learning culture, the creation of a learning organisation is dependent upon embedding learning in the management processes of the organisation or, to put it another way, to extend the focus on learning from the classroom and the research laboratory to the wider organisation, so that the organisation creates and disseminates knowledge that informs the development of the organisation.

References and further reading


