
Continuing professional development and workplace learning 6: HRD and organisational learning

Ian W. Smith

The author

Ian W. Smith is a Member of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section Standing Committee and Senior Librarian (Personnel), La Trobe University Library, Victoria, Australia.
E-mail: i.smith@latrobe.edu.au

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Abstract

Outlines several models of organisational learning and emphasises the importance of the development of a culture of organisational learning in achieving effective human resource development outcomes.

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Human resource development and organisational learning

Change. The previous article in this series noted the constancy of change (Smith, 2003). Change which is occurring at an increasingly rapid pace in our societies, our profession, our organisations and our lives as individuals. In this environment of increasingly rapid change strategic human resource development is not an option but a strategic imperative. Those that fail to develop risk being left behind. The existence of a learning culture in organisations, the establishment and ongoing encouragement of an environment that facilitates learning and development, can be a significant factor in achieving successful outcomes in both human resources and organisational development.

The concept of organisational learning has appeared with increasing frequency, and in a variety of guises and variations, in the literature of human resource management, organisational effectiveness, and strategic management over the past two decades. The literature on this topic is diffuse and there is no clear agreement on either the differences or the commonalities between different characterisations of the process of organisational learning. Several models which attempt to describe and analyse this process are briefly described here. While they vary in some respects, all the models have several things in common. These include recognition that:

- organisational learning is desirable, that it can and should occur;
- learning in organisations involves complex interactions between all organisational elements; and
- that people, the core resource in organisations, are a prime element in the learning process.

Models of learning in organisations

Organisational psychologists Argyris and Schon were pioneers in recognising the idea of organisational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Argyris and Schon characterise organisations that exhibit organisational learning as those that are willing and able to perceive, and respond to, the need to develop and change. Organisations that act in this way can achieve an environment and culture that encourages the



identification of, and reflection on, errors and mistakes. Importantly, such organisations see these as opportunities to develop. Learning from experience and reflection, through either structured or informal learning, is a crucial factor in developing the capacity, individually and organisationally, to grow and develop. At an organisational level such an orientation towards learning is formed by a base set of values and organisational behaviours that value and support learning. The establishment and continuing encouragement of a learning oriented organisational culture provides the basis for an entity that can learn and grow on the basis of its experiences – both good and bad.

An important extension and active application of organisational learning ideas can be seen in the work of Peter Senge, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Business School (Senge, 1990). Senge, who is perhaps the best known exponent of the learning organisation concept, develops a model of a learning organisation as a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. His prescription for the attainment of learning organisation status emphasises several basic principles:

- systems thinking and application of systems management methods;
- the development of openness and trust;
- finding new ways of reframing and thinking through issues and problems;
- team development through learning; and,
- the development of a shared set of values and visions for the organisation.

Senge (along with Argyris and others) places particular emphasis on the importance of deeply embedding critical self reflection thinking and learning in an organisation. This so called double-loop learning is concerned with moving beyond merely examining the consequences of organisational actions and strategies. What is required is an embedded process of constant review, and when necessary modification, of an organisation's underlying norms, policies and values. Such a process of making fully informed decisions using a wide and flexible frame of reference is critical in an environment of rapid change and increasing complexity.

Both the organisational learning and learning organisation models encompass varying degrees of active intervention in order to create, implement and facilitate the achievement of a state of organisational learning. The learning environment is a somewhat less prescriptive model, one that encompasses less active intervention. The learning environment is an organisational model characterised by a relaxation of control by management and a relaxation of privileged forces, a mode where people operate with reduced management control, more opportunities to explore, and encouragement to reflect on and refine modes of operation. In a learning environment managers may create the situation in which learning and development can best be encouraged to occur, but there is less managerial control over the process of learning than there is in the more structured mode of the learning organisation. The learning environment concept places emphasis on self development of employees, dialogue that illuminates and accepts differences, and willingness among members of an organisation to share tacit knowledge and to constructively and honestly engage in feedback (Rifkin and Fulop, 1997).

The concept of learning space sits at what might be described as the more radical end of the spectrum of organisational learning (Rifkin and Fulop, 1997). Learning space goes beyond the loosening up of managerial control envisaged in the learning environment and focuses on interactions at the micro-process level of the workplace. The learning space model regards these interactions as significantly shaping the potential for organisational learning and calls for a considerable relaxation of management control and for attention to be paid to all participants at all levels of an organisation. As such, learning space particularly emphasises the contribution to organisational learning that is made by all of the individuals making up a group.

It may be seen from this brief summary of several different models of the process of learning in organisations that while divergent in certain aspects, particularly in relation to degrees of form structure and control, common themes and core characteristics are apparent. Organisations that truly embrace the notion of organisational learning are likely to exhibit at

least some, and possibly all, of the following characteristics (Rowden, 2001):

- providing continuous learning opportunities;
- using learning – individual and organisation wide – to achieve organisational goals;
- linking individual performance with overall organisational performance;
- fostering inquiry and dialogue;
- embracing creative tension as a source of energy and renewal;
- encouraging people to take risks (and recognising that sometimes things fail);
- encouraging and facilitating the open sharing of experience;
- ensuring an active awareness of, and interaction with, the environment (both internal and external), in which the organisation operates.

It is important to recognise that the models discussed here provide only an outline of the characteristics of learning oriented organisations. These models should not be regarded as prescriptive. There is no one mode of organisational learning that is right (or wrong). Rather these organisational learning models are best seen as maps or frameworks within which effective learning – individual and organisational – can occur. Groups embracing the notion of organisational learning, in its broadest sense, may be at many and varied points on the learning and development continuum. Some will be operating at a high level of organisational learning capability, others will be progressing towards that goal. It is not the case that organisations either do, or do not, “fit” the framework. There is not a simple pass/fail test for “learning organisations”. What is important is that the varied characteristics of organisations that strive to learn are recognised and that groups which seek to achieve effectiveness through organisational learning make the commitment to, and sustain an orientation, towards achieving learning outcomes.

The intersection of organisational learning and human resource development

In an environment marked by a rapid pace of change the ongoing development of the skill

and knowledge of individuals is a strategic imperative for organisations. This is an important element in maintaining organisational capability and effectiveness and keeping up with change. Human resource development is concerned with enhancing the work related knowledge, skills, and capability of people; people working as individuals, in teams, and in organisations. It is about providing people with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and training that enables them to perform effectively. The existence in organisations of a learning culture, one that embraces and encourages both learning within and by the organisational entity itself and learning by the individuals in the group, can be a critical factor in ensuring the effectiveness and value of human resource development activity.

The concepts encompassed under the broad rubric of “organisational learning” are still relatively new and they are still developing. As with any new and in-vogue ideas, there is a danger that these may be seen as the latest quick-fix tool in the management tool box. Organisational learning, in its various manifestations, is not a panacea or a “magic bullet”. However, a strong culture of organisational learning, an embedded orientation towards reflection, learning from experience, and the continuing development of both individuals and groups, can be an important element in maximising the contribution of human resource development to achieving strategically valuable outcomes.

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