A new perspective on organizational learning: Creating learning teams

Dale W. Lick

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Learning Systems Institute, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2540, USA

Abstract

This article elaborates a conceptual framework for learning organizations, through the introduction of change concepts and the creation of learning teams, and reports on a case that illustrates this framework. When organizational administrators and staff are asked whether their committees and work groups function as learning teams and their program functions as a learning community, the typical answer is 'of course'. Too frequently, though, groups and programs are far from these goals. What is required is for administrative and staff groups of a program or unit to understand (a) what it takes for a group to become a learning team and for the unit to become a learning community, and (b) how to make these become a reality to improve effectiveness and increase productivity. This article offers a comprehensive definition for 'learning teams' and introduces a detailed design process for creating 'learning teams' and 'organizational learning'. A real-world example from education highlights the implementation of a major school change process.
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In this article, we develop a new perspective for significantly increasing organizational learning by providing a greater understanding of related and required concepts of change, learning, collaborative work systems, teams, synergy and authentic teams, co-mentoring relationships and learning teams, and their implementation in organizations. To do this, a foundation is laid for: change and its involvement as the number one issue facing organizations; change creation as the key process for major change in organizations; and the Universal Change Principle as the overarching tool for successfully dealing with change. Following that is a discussion of the nature of teams and team failure, synergistic teams as authentic teams and their prerequisites and the process for creating them, and the importance and essence of teams being co-mentoring. After this, a new, comprehensive meaning for 'learning team', is introduced and elaborated in terms of 'alignment' and 'capacity development'. A practical, learning-team design process is described. We conclude with an example of a major, successful school-wide, organizational-learning effort in the Springfield (Missouri) Public Schools, where the new learning-team design process played a significant role in the success of that school system.

E-mail address: dlick@lsi.fsu.edu

1. Methodology

The methodology is neither qualitative nor quantitative, per se. Instead, it is based on findings from the author's and other researchers' qualitative and quantitative results (e.g. a doctoral dissertation, school accreditation data, and conclusions from field practices) and from the literature concerning the theory and practice of organizations, systems, psychology, education and learning, human dynamics and development, and especially change. What is key about the methodology is the overarching approach of pulling together the relevant critical findings from all these fields and melding them together into a coherent, meaningful and practical new way of looking at organizational learning, using a new conceptual framework for learning teams.

2. Setting the backdrop

It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be… our everyman must take on a science fictional way of thinking. Isaac Asimov

2.1. The number one issue facing organizations

When we talk about improving the effectiveness and productivity in business and industry and increasing student

achievement in education, we are discussing major change, and, as has been clearly evident in these and other fields, such change is difficult to bring about and sustain. Consequently, the number one issue facing all of us today is the urgent requirement to initiate, implement, and lead and manage intentional, meaningful, planned change—change creation.

This being the case, the critical question becomes: why do the majority of our significant organizational change initiatives seem to fail or be only partially successful? Leaders often avoid this question because it is natural to consciously or subconsciously fear the answer or the consequences of the answer. Typically, leaders would find that they had (Lick & Kaufman, 2000, pp. 25–26, chap 2):

- Not fundamentally reframed their own thinking relative to major change.
- Implemented a strategic planning approach that is incomplete and inadequate for the massive, holistic, systemic change that is required.
- Failed to prepare their organization for the important transformations that major, significant change requires. Rummler (2004), for example, reminds us that when you pit an outstanding performance against a bad organization, the organization wins every time.
- Not provided and implemented a detailed, structured, disciplined transition plan, including appropriate incentives, for identifying and then completing the major change, i.e. a plan that would transition people, processes and, most importantly, the culture from the old paradigm to the new one.

Organizations and their people typically have chosen, consciously or by default, to resist, ignore, or sidestep the realities and impact of change. They often turn to change management in the hope that once a change is upon them, they can manage or control the change and its effects. But, change management is reactive and requires a quick and nimble response to dealing with change. This reactive approach frequently prevents one from defining useful change before being overtaken by it. In particular, change management is based on people sensing that their world, internally or externally, has changed and they must respond somehow.

2.2. Change creation

To increase an organization's potential for success, instead of an organization being just reactive, the organization and its leadership and people must become proactive and define and then 'join' change, embrace it as a partner, and use it creatively to advance the organization's vision, mission and goals and those of society. This is where change creation comes to the fore.

With dramatic and omnipresent change being the order of the day, it becomes harder than ever to predict the future. So what should be the approach for dealing with tomorrow? Management guru Peter Drucker (1985) simply and powerfully answers this important question when he advises that since you can't predict the future, you must create it; that is,

organizations and their people must exploit change and *create* the future that serves organizations and society best. To do this, an organization and its people must become effective leaders and practitioners of change creation.

'Change creation' (Lick & Kaufman, 2000, chap 2) is the process whereby an organization and its people:

- Invite, accept and welcome change as a vital component in defining and achieving future success.
- Define the future they want to design and deliver.
- Create the designed future and continuously make improvements while moving ever closer to the desired future.

Change creation is proactive. When organizations enact change creation, they intentionally move from being victims of change to becoming masters of change. This means leaders and their organizations *must*: (a) take genuine responsibility for leading change; (b) effectively define and plan for the desired change; (c) comprehensively prepare the organization for the planned change; and (d) develop and implement a change approach that capably transitions its people, processes, and culture from the existing paradigm to the new, desired one (Lick & Kaufman, 2000, chap 2). An important part of change creation includes (a) modifying aspects of the existing culture that inhibit creative approaches and effectiveness, (b) questioning the solutions of the past toward eliminating conceptual approaches and processes that interfere with new, potentially more valuable and productive systems, and (c) replace familiar and comfortable processes and technologies with new ones that stretch our capacities and potential for greater educational quality and productivity. Although such things may be difficult and take us out of comfort zones, they are essential if we are to be more effective and productive.

How do institutions bring about change creation? In the remaining sections of this article, we discuss the especially important transformational concept of *learning teams*, which, in the future, will play a key role in helping to bring about change creation and required progressive changes.

2.3. Learning and change

Learning is absolutely fundamental to change creation efforts. While traditional definitions of learning are most often used, such as 'gaining knowledge of or skill in by study, experience, or being taught', (verb form) and 'a knowledge acquired by study, experience, or being taught', a deeper meaning for learning is proposed for change creation in what might be called 'capacity' or 'action' learning.

- Learning (verb form): gaining capacity (willingness and ability) for effective action.
- Learning (noun form): capacity (willingness and ability) for effective action.

When these terms are used in change creation circumstances, 'effective action' is to be interpreted in relation to