



A multilevel approach to building and leading learning organizations[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A multilevel model is offered proposing that organizational learning is an interdependent system where effective leaders enact intervention strategies at the individual (micro), network (meso), and systems (macro) levels. We suggest that leaders approach organizational learning by setting the conditions and structure for learning to occur, while limiting direct interference in the actual creative processes. First, leaders may increase the level of developmental readiness of individual followers, thereby increasing their motivation and ability to approach learning experiences and adapt their mental models. These individuals then serve as catalysts of learning within and between social networks. Second, leaders may promote the diffusion of knowledge between these knowledge catalysts within and across social networks through influencing both the structure and functioning of knowledge networks. Finally, leaders may target actions at the systems level to improve the diffusion to, and institutionalization of, knowledge to the larger organization.

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To maintain viability and flourish in the new knowledge economy, organizations must have highly effective learning processes. Organizations are open systems and their survival and prosperity depends on their ability to learn and adapt to threats and opportunities presented by dynamic external environments (Burke, 2002; Katz & Kahn, 1978). History is replete with examples of organizations that fail to learn and adapt internal processes to maintain congruence or “fit” (Nadler & Tushman, 1989) with evolving external environments. Foster & Kaplan (2001) point out that only 39 companies in the *Forbes* top 100 list existed 70 years after the first publication of the list. Perhaps more alarming is that of the 39 surviving companies, only 18 remained in the top 100. Without question, economic conditions, bad strategic decisions, changing technology, and other factors play a role in organizational demise. Yet, as Argyris & Schon (1978) as well as Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel (1998) suggest, this demise is often a result of an organization's failure to learn and subsequently adapt.

With this in mind, we offer a multilevel theory for building and leading learning organizations. Our position is that doing so is best affected when leaders intervene: 1) at the micro level by fostering followers' readiness to learn and promoting their learning through engagement in developmental experiences, 2) at the meso level by promoting and facilitating effective knowledge-centric social networks, and 3) at the macro/systems level by scanning, sanctioning, and institutionalizing critical emergent knowledge using specific leadership and management practices.

1. Organizational learning in a complexity context

Organizational learning and adaptation is inherently complex in that it involves the conjunction of networks of varied and often conflicting individuals, groups, functions, policies, and processes. Through these competing demands, ideas emerge and increase in

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complexity (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). The literature suggests that leaders can approach a complex context either with a reductionist strategy aimed at attempting to retain positive control over what is being learned, or by absorption via focusing on adaptability (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). The leadership literature has largely viewed organizational learning and adaptation through reduction, suggesting that top-down and particularly linear learning processes can be initiated and controlled by senior leaders (Beckhard & Harris, 1977; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Conversely, based on recent theories of complexity leadership, we suggest that social systems in complex organizational contexts are inherently unstable and unpredictable, and the causal effects of leadership on organizational outcomes are rarely directly observable or entirely deterministic (Hannah, Eggers, & Jennings, 2008; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In sum, a complex context characterized by dynamic and discontinuous forces prevents the management of organizational learning entirely through top-down processes (Bridges, 1986; Weick & Quinn, 1999). The challenge for leaders, then, becomes how to pursue an absorption strategy that builds organizational capacity for learning and adaptability across organizational levels.

1.1. *Leading a learning organization from a multilevel perspective*

Given these discontinuous and dynamic social processes, we concur with Hamel's (2000) suggestion that learning and adaptation are best driven by coalitions of activists embedded in social networks at multiple levels of the organization that serve as catalysts to spur organizational learning through social interaction. The two central tenets of our proposed model first include the development of what we term *knowledge catalysts*, and second, the establishment of conditions that foster these catalysts interacting within and between social networks in such a way as to create and diffuse knowledge across the organization.

We argue for a multi-level approach to learning where top-down leadership serves to set the conditions to maximize the emergence of knowledge creation and diffusion, while limiting leader intrusion into the actual creative processes. Specifically, Kozlowski & Klein (2000) state that "a phenomenon is emergent when it originates in the cognition, affect, behaviors, or other characteristics of individuals, is amplified by their interactions, and manifests as a higher-level, collective phenomenon" (p. 55). As such, by setting the conditions for knowledge emergence, yet allowing the creative process to self-organize, we propose that organizational learning will be improved.

1.2. *Leading and leadership of organizational learning*

Formal leaders are hardly obsolete in our model, but we propose that leaders focus less on *what* their organizations should learn, but rather on *how* to set the conditions for collectives to effectively learn and share knowledge. Indeed, formal leaders, due to their central positions in social networks, are in fact more likely than informal leaders to influence social interactions, such as those constituting collective learning (Ibarra, 1993; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Therefore, we distinguish *leading* from *leadership* and approach *leading* as an influence process where individual leaders behave in ways that set the proper conditions for individuals, groups, networks and systems to enact emergent behaviors that promote learning and adaptation. These individual leader actions then serve to either promote or deter effective *leadership* and its development, which based on Day (2000), we define as the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in formal and informal leadership roles and processes that promote emergent learning and knowledge diffusion.

As proposed by Vera & Crossan (2004) and Berson, Nemanich, Waldman, Galvin, & Keller (2006), the leadership process encompasses both formal and informal leaders embedded throughout multiple levels of the organization that interact through varying degrees of shared leadership (Pearce, 2004) to influence organizational learning. "Leaders" and "followers" in this framework are therefore identified by their levels of influence in the network versus their formally appointed positions. In a dynamic learning network, one can thus oscillate between being a leader or a follower as his or her level of influence changes based on demonstrated expertise and other factors (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005).

1.3. *Advancing existing models of organizational learning*

Informing our approach, researchers have linked leadership to improved organizational learning (e.g. Argyris & Schon, 1978; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). Further, multilevel (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Hannah et al., 2008) and social network approaches to leadership (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005; Mayer & Piccolo, 2006) have also been offered. Most central to our focus here, Berson et al. (2006) and Vera & Crossan (2004) have made important advances in multilevel models that link leadership and organizational learning.

We differ from organizational learning models that focus on "extraordinary" leaders (i.e. visionary, inspirational, transformational) that are believed to influence learning processes in a more direct manner (e.g. Jansen, Vera, & Crossan, 2009; Vera & Crossan, 2004). We instead focus on the role of leaders as social architects and orchestrators of emergent processes relevant to learning. These architects operate in a less direct and visible manner, developing individual learners and effective social networks that then serve to promote organizational learning with minimal levels of further leader involvement. Our framework does recognize the importance of a more active role of visionary leaders primarily *after* new knowledge emerges from a social network in order to promote and support the diffusion of that knowledge across networks to the larger organization. In sum, our intent is to advance existing multilevel perspectives by: 1) explicitly linking together the leadership, social network, and individual and organizational learning literatures, and 2) present specific leader interventions at multiple levels to set the conditions for knowledge emergence and diffusion at individual, network, and systems levels.

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