

THE LEARNING ORGANISATION: PROMISE AND POTENTIAL

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Introduction

The current educational scene in the South Pacific is a bee-hive of activity; expansion of primary and secondary education, teacher upgrading, curricula reforms, infrastructure improvements, and extension of access to educational opportunity. If this groundswell of modernisation is to be sustained, then greater attention will have to be given to the quality and management of our educational organisations. The earlier tradition which has tended to characterise our educational management must give way to more imaginative and innovative practices.

Interestingly, there is recognition by some South Pacific educational administrators of the need to appraise and adapt newer and more promising management concepts to improve the quality and outcomes of their organisations. For example, recently Naiyaga (1994) probed the appropriateness of *Total Quality Management (TQM)* for raising the quality of Fijian secondary schools; Tabua (1994) made a convincing case for staff development based on the principles of *Human Resources Development*, while Neilson (1995) advocated the integration of *holism* to make the Solomon Islands education system more relevant to local needs. I believe that more South Pacific educators should be exposed to such recent management concepts, being state-of-the-art research and writings of successful educational practitioners. I believe that this exposure is crucial in their quest for modernisation, and for extending their managerial horizons.

Several movements have influenced educational administrators in recent years, with varying degrees of success: corporate managerialism, effectiveness and excellence, TQM and Quality Assurance (see for example, Davies and Ellison 1992, McIlhatton et al 1993, Sallis 1990, Conway and Yorke 1991, Cuttance 1994), and leadership as cultural activity. One such organisation in Australia and the USA is *The Learning Organisation*. In this article, I will analyse the concept of the Learning Organisation and its emergence as a powerful metaphor for capacity building, consider its

potential benefit for educational organisations, identify challenges inherent in enacting a learning organisation culture and make a case for its adoption in the South Pacific.

The Learning Organisation: Definition and Characteristics

The learning organisation has been variously described as the learning community (Murphy 1995), community of commitment (Senge and Kofman 1993), and the learning company (Pedler et al 1991). According to Senge (1990):

In the learning organisation...people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly 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.

Pedler et al (1991) suggest that:

The learning company is...a place **that encourages everyone** who works in it or who has contact with it to **learn**. It has the '**learning habit**' so that action taken for reason of production, marketing, problem solving or customer service also yields a **harvest of reflection, insights and new issues for action**. (emphasis mine)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Capper et al (1994):

A learning organisation is one skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Donegan (1990) describes the characteristics of the learning organisation as:

Recognition that organisations must **adapt** to a future of constant change.

- . Acceptance of the **key role of people** in this process of adaptation.
- . Facilitation of the learning and personal development of **all people** in the organisation through a **truly empowering culture**.
- . The use of combined energy, creativity and commitment generated among employees by this developmental climate to fuel **an ongoing process** of organisational transformation. (emphasis mine)

When analysed carefully, it is apparent that the learning organisation is characterised by:

- . a culture of continuous improvement
- . support and tolerance of risk taking
- . people-oriented, facilitative leadership.

In such organisations:

- . learning is a habit
- . individual and organisational capacity are continually built up
- . collaborative learning and interdependence are recognised and encouraged
- . there is constant effort to improve, correct and excel and
- . reflection-in-action becomes a part of the culture.

The enactment of this philosophy of renewal and improvement is considerably

enhanced by the quality of leadership, understanding, mutual respect, support and enthusiasm of the followers, and action based on appraisal, feedback and collaborative learning.

Among the major reasons for its resurgence and its growing popularity are the turbulent environment of most organisations; a deep desire to transcend the status quo; growing demand for individual organisational accountability; and the impelling recognition that the future viability of organisations would depend upon their competitive edge.

Its Attractiveness To Educational Organisations

The foregoing imperatives equally apply to educational organisations that experience "more of the same approach," constant demand on them to make their contribution in developing the "clever country" (Porter et al 1990) and to enact an enterprising national culture to secure a competitive edge over other nations (The Karpin Report 1995). Also, given the central role of learning and teaching, it is natural and appropriate that educational organisations would gravitate towards the concept of the learning community (see for example Hill et al 1995). It has found strong favour in the NSW Department of Education, NSE TAFE Commission, and among educational administrators, policy makers, and practitioners and teachers throughout Australia and abroad. The most apparent benefits of the Learning Organisation are its basis as a platform for staff capacity building, transformation of educational leadership as stewardship and reformation of management structures and processes for quality outcomes.

Challenges Inherent in Enacting a Learning Culture in Schools

While all organisations are learning organisations in varying degrees, I foresee certain challenges in enacting a *deliberate, effective* learning culture. These challenges include ignorant enthusiasm of converts, poor understanding about the nature and purpose of capacity building *through* perpetual learning, inadequate resources; variable commitment of the leadership and key staff; and entrenched values and practices which could make collaborative learning difficult.

I will now dwell on more specific challenges which schools are likely to encounter when enacting a learning organisational culture.

Challenge 1: The Reality

While the *rhetoric* of the Learning Organisation emphasises *collaborative learning*, the existing structure is ingrained in and still rewards *individualism*. In such competitive environments, self preservation and individual agenda rather than sharing and cooperation would tend to predominate. *We must therefore find ways of encouraging and rewarding cooperative learning.*

Challenge 2: The Mind Set

People tend to see work and learning as separate forums where our workplace (e.g. the school) is for working and our learning and development take place *elsewhere*. *Learning at work would therefore require a shift in this traditional, dichotomous thinking.* Furthermore, entrapped by the corporate managerialist paradigm, it seems that many teachers and school administrators are obsessed with *outcomes* and *products*. Often, I have observed a disturbing impatience concerning team work and the learning opportunities which collaborative *processes* can provide. If an authentic learning culture is to prevail, *we have to relearn how to learn together.*

Challenge 3: Fragmented Development

Notwithstanding the value of any learning opportunity, *ad hoc* capacity building is generally ineffectual and cannot sustain genuine learning or result in long-term development and improvement. Also such efforts do not really inspire staff commitment or confidence. Nor do they motivate the management to provide the commitment for resource back-up necessary to support meaningful learning-development initiatives.

Challenge 4: Stewardship, Mentoring and Nurturing

In their quest for continuous learning and development, staff need stewardship, mentoring, coaching and nurturing (see Block 1993). However, how many of us have the time, inclination or the skills to provide this kind of

leadership? Furthermore, some of us are constrained by our lack of knowledge and understanding of how **adults** learn.

Some Strategies for Establishing a Learning Culture in Schools

Many useful models are available for enacting learning cultures (Garvin 1993, Kline and Saunders 1993, Duignan 1994, Weick and Leon 1993), and inspiring leadership practice (Block 1993). For the school context, however, I recommend the following strategies that are outlined in Figure 1.

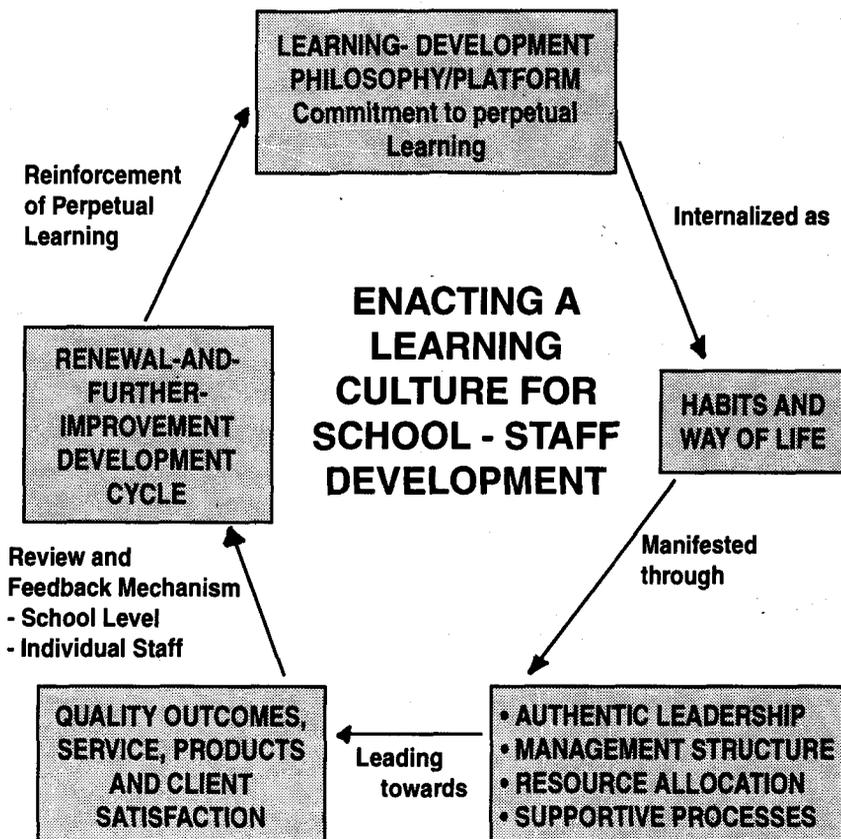


Figure 1

Strategy 1: Formulate a Learning-Development Philosophy/Platform

Very few schools have any identifiable philosophy/platform underpinning their individual-organisational development efforts. In the face of the growing complexity of our educational environment (Porter et al 1992, McCulla 1995), the expanding scientific and knowledge revolution, the increasing technological advancement and customer sophistication, the need for competent and knowledgeable teachers and administrators is beyond question. Although the Learning Organisation in such a context provides a powerful metaphor and justification for continuous learning and capacity building, leadership action and practice must be based on a philosophy/platform of values which will guide and support it.

Strategy 2: Infuse Learning as a Habit, Way of Life

It is the function and challenge of leadership to ensure that the values enshrined in the Learning-Development Platform are *transformed* into habits and "way of life" in the school. Unless the values are lived and modelled, they remain platitudes and a source of growing cynicism.

Strategy 3: Leadership, Management Structure and Processes

The leadership through their actions and commitment inspire and sustain learning-development efforts. Although our entrenched values are slow to unlearn and change (Bhindi 1995), positive learning action habits can be inculcated through the encouragement of authentic leadership (Duignan & Bhindi, forthcoming), responsive school structure (Eller 1994, Murphy) and supportive innovative processes (e.g. action learning TAFE 1993), work-based teams (Carter and Gribble 1991, TAFE 1994), differentiated supervision (Walker 1990) and resource back-up.

Strategy 4: Performance Appraisal, Feedback and Renewal

A major plank of any successful learning-development-renewal cycle would have to be reliable data and feedback on performance, achievement and potential for further organisational and individual growth. This calls for a more enlightened view of appraisal. This also explains the recent concern

and search for alternative and supportive ways of appraising staff and organisational performance (see for example: *Unicorn* June 1995, *Principal Matters* July 1994). There is now an implied expectation and understanding that appraisal would not be "head-hunting", "blame-pointing" or ritualistic fetish; it would form the ongoing basis of renewing and improving individual and organisational learning. Towards this effort and expectation, the question is - "Will the real grandmother reincarnate or will the big bad wolf lunge at Little Red Riding Hood?"

Implications for the South Pacific

My first-hand experience of the South Pacific region over the past decade convinces me of the potential benefit of "converting" our educational organisations into *learning organisations*. I believe that such a conversion would add dynamism to the otherwise conservative management approach prevalent in many of our educational organisations. Such a movement would ensure that the individual and organisational growth would follow *well-charted pathways* based on relevant needs, reliable performance feedback, and a continuous cycle of learning, improvement and development. Unfortunately, despite good intentions, much of this growth has been either *ad hoc*, sporadic, or driven by the enthusiasm of a few helpful aid agencies, visionary leaders and practitioners, or by the salespersonship of local or external consultants.

The popularisation and successful implementation of the concept of the *learning organisation* in the South Pacific would require powerful sponsors and attitudinal changes at the Ministry level. It would also require acceptance and integration of the concept of perpetual learning and growth at the institutional level, and regular review of the content and assumptions of educational management programmes offered by our training agencies in the region.

In the South Pacific context, the *learning organisation* could be used as a framework for planning more effective in-service education. At the institutional level, it could instil a more systematic approach to staff development and provide strong motivation to individuals to make a greater commitment to their own growth and advancement.

Finally, a word of caution is appropriate. Every society, those of the South Pacific included, has its own threshold of conservatism, inertia and change. There are values which are persistent and have stood the test of time, while others are open to influence and change. What to change and what to retain is a judgement best made by the local people themselves. Educational administrators in the South Pacific will have to decide what particular values should drive *their* Learning Organisations. In doing so, they will have to bear in mind the cultural appropriateness, timing and pace of their implementation process.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the concept, characteristics and the emergence of the Learning Organisation and its attractiveness to the educational setting. I have suggested that the Learning Organisation, if creatively enacted, can assist schools in their capacity-building efforts. I have identified certain challenges inherent in enacting a learning culture at the school level and then made suggestions about how it might be implemented successfully. Finally, I have made a case for the adoption of the concept of the Learning Organisation with a view to improving the quality and management of educational organisations in the South Pacific.

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