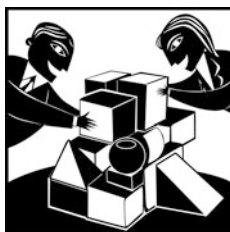# Proposition 96
# Dimensions of the Learning Organization

**In a Word** Organizational learning is still seeking a theory and there can be no (and perhaps cannot be) agreement on the dimensions of the learning organization. However, useful models associated with learning and change can be leveraged individually or in association to reflect on the overall system of an organization.



## Background

If organizational learning is still seeking a theory, there can be no (and perhaps cannot be) agreement on the dimensions of the learning organization. Even if the dimensions were understood, the connection between learning (or lack thereof) and performance remains unclear.[1] However, regardless of the disputed state of the art, a multilevel, practical but necessarily exploratory and simple framework of common and individual variables associated with learning and change follows. Here as

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[1]Most organizations know little about where they lose knowledge, so the costs of lost knowledge are largely hidden. As a result, there is no clear ownership of the problem and little value is given to knowledge-sharing activities.
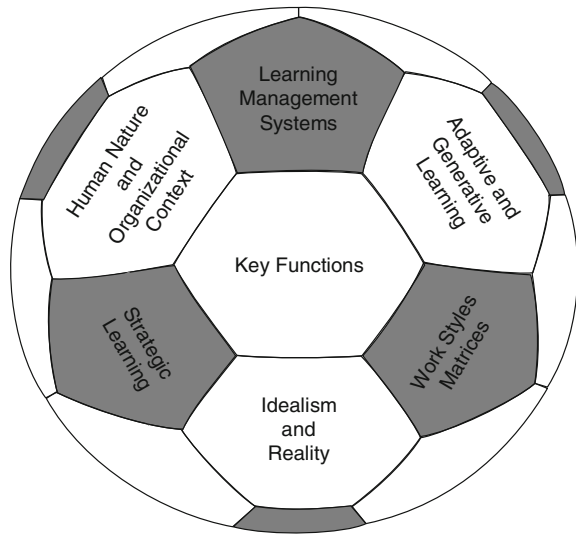
elsewhere, experimentation has an important role to play. Individual and collective learning are not about finding out what others already know, even if that is a useful first stage—it is about solving problems[2] by doing, reflecting, connecting, and testing until a solution forms part of organizational life. There is no stock answer nor is there a single best approach.[3] Figure 96.1 suggests concepts that can be used individually or in association to reflect on the overall system.

> *The purpose of science is not to analyze or describe but to make useful models of the world. A model is useful if it allows us to get use out of it.*
>
> —Edward de Bono

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[2]Some streams of open systems theory reject problem solving as unproductive, instead preferring to work on desirable futures and necessary actions (only "solving problems" as they become barriers to a goal). The difference in the outlooks is significant.

[3]A parallel can be found in the disparity of systems models for organizational design. Those used often in the last 20–30 years have included McKinsey's 7-S Model, Galbraith's Star Model, Weisbord's Six Box Model, Nadler and Tushman's Congruence Model, and Burke-Litwin's Causal Model. Each of these shines a particular light on an organizational system, in the way perhaps that astronomers standing on different planets would examine different configurations of the universe. No one perspective is correct. The choice of model depends also on how complex its user wishes it to be. In recent years, less inward-looking (closed system) models have been developed.

# Learning Management Systems

At the simplest level, one might consider the critical applications that would allow an organization to recognize its learning orientations and, from there, mark out the structures that affect how easy or hard it is for learning to occur. Figure 96.2 isolates 12 key learning systems from a managerial, somewhat top-down, perspective.

## Key Functions

The literature on learning organizations suggests that certain key tasks must be undertaken for an organization to learn effectively. A set of competencies that might need to be developed to support learning, largely from a functional perspective, would include gathering internal evidence; accessing external learning; priming communication systems; drawing conclusions; developing organizational memory; and integrating learning into policy, strategy, and operations.
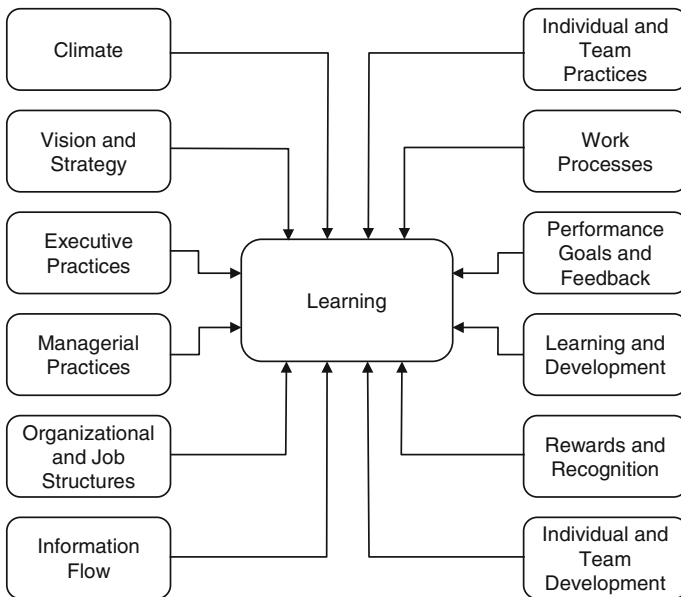


**Fig. 96.2** Learning management systems. *Source* Author

## Adaptive and Generative Learning

It is also helpful to demarcate some dimensions of the learning organization in terms of adaptive and generative learning, the two most commonly cited distinguishing characteristics of organizational learning.

## Relating Human Nature to Organizational Context

Social capital is the stock of active connections among people, that is, the mutual understanding, shared values and behaviors, and trust that bind members of networks and communities, making cooperative action possible. The social cohesion that results is critical for societies to prosper and for development to be sustainable. The literature on social capital is vast but the idea of looking at social capital in organizations, not society, is relatively new. Here, the argument is that social capital makes an organization more than a collection of individuals. Ehin (2000) offered a comprehensive framework to understand how human nature supports or undermines voluntary workplace collaboration and innovation.

## Strategic Learning

Organizational learning must be understood as a pattern in a stream of decisions. How does strategy form in organizations? The various types of strategies uncovered in research can be located somewhere between the ends of a continuum along which real-world strategies lay. The most common might be labeled "planned," "entrepreneurial," "ideological," "umbrella," "process," "unconnected," "consensus," and "imposed". The results will either be intended or realized. More interestingly, Henry Mintzberg distinguished deliberate strategies—realized as intended —from emergent strategies—patterns or consistencies realized despite, or in the absence of, intentions.[4]

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[4]Still, notwithstanding the intuitive sense of Mintzberg's approach to strategy learning, failing to grasp thoroughly the influence of power on the strategy-making process can severely inhibit the potential of strategy making as a vehicle of organizational learning. Views of organizations as cohesive entities are unrealistic and unhelpful, and it is vital to recognize the plethora of interest groups that inevitably compete to shape an organization's direction.

## Work Styles Matrices

Ultimately, learning must be customized to the circumstances of an organization and the work it conducts. Each organization is different, but the work styles of any organization fall under four models: process, systems, network, and competence. In brief, the process and systems models correspond to work settings that are routine and require little interpretation. What is needed to perform tasks is know-how; learning takes place through generalized learning and development training with the help of how-to guides. Evaluation and other reports can help as well. However, the network and competence models call for much higher levels of judgment and depend on deeper understanding and insight as well as an ability to improvise. Work on policies, strategies, programs, and projects fits in these domains.

## Idealism and Reality

Without denigrating concepts of systemic thinking—since a better appreciation of the whole and the interrelationship between the parts will lead to more pertinent action—certain types of organizations of machine, missionary, or political configurations have a long way to go before they reach the ideal of learning organizations.

## Reference

Ehin C (2000) Unleashing intellectual capital. Butterworth-Heinemann, Boston

## Further Reading

ADB (2008) Auditing the lessons architecture. Manila
ADB (2009) Learning for change in ADB. Manila