

EURO Scout.Doc

Learning Organisations

The learning organisation is a concept that is becoming an increasingly widespread philosophy in modern companies, from the largest multinationals to the smallest ventures. We think this could also be a philosophy for the Scout Movement as well.

What is achieved by this philosophy depends considerably on one's interpretation of it and commitment to it. The quote below gives a simple definition that we felt was the real meaning behind the Learning Organisation.

What is a learning organisation?

"... A learning organisation is one which improves its knowledge and understanding of itself and its environment over time, by facilitating and making use of the learning of its individual members."

(P J Thurbin, 1994)

There are many characteristics of learning organisations and these include:

- Creation of learning teams and structures
- Open encouragement and reward for innovation and creativity
- Regular feedback processes
- Sharing of a common vision
- Acceptance that both success and failure are part of the learning process.

The following pages give an overview of the learning organisation and may prove useful to any reader interested in learning more about it. We have also included some reflections and outcomes from events organised by the WOSM - European Scout Region on this issue.



The underlying cause for recent emphasis on organisational learning is because of the increased pace of change. Classically, the work environment has been thought of as being conservative and difficult to change. Learning was something divorced from work and innovation was seen as the necessary but disruptive way to change. Organisations that learn quickly and then innovate will be able to change their work practices to perform better in the constantly changing environment. Change is now measured in terms of months not years as it was in the past.

The Shift to a Learning Organisation

- Training
- Hierarchical top-down control
- Work isolated from life
- Structured
- Organisations as mechanical structures
- Control
- Rules & Values
- Adversarial

- Learning
- Collegial and networking
- Work integrated with life
- Interactive
- Organisations as dynamic organic systems
- Commitment and co-operation
- Shared goals and procedures
- Mutuality; win-win

Why a Learning Organisation?

An organisation that performs badly is easily recognisable. Can you spot the signs?

- Do your members and staff seem unmotivated or uninterested in their work?
- Does your staff lack the skill and knowledge to adjust to new jobs?
- Do you seem to be the only one to come up with all the ideas?
- And does your staff simply follow orders?
- Do your teams argue constantly and lack real productivity?
- Or lack communication between each other?
- And when the "guru" is not at work do things get put on hold?

- Are you always the last to hear about problems?
- Or worst still the first to hear about customer complaints?
- And do the same problems occur over and over?

Scouting is not a business but if any of these points sound familiar the answer for you could be a learning organisation. The terms "company", "workers" and "employees" are used on few places in this paper as the thinking is based on business. But the ideas transfer easily to Scouting.

How to Create a Learning Organisation?

The Building Blocks

Before a learning organisation can be implemented, a solid foundation can be made by taking into account the following:

- Awareness
- Environment
- Leadership
- Empowerment
- Learning

Awareness

Organisations must be aware that learning is necessary before they can develop into a learning organisation. This may seem to be a strange statement but this learning must take place at all levels; not just the management level. Once the organisation has accepted the need for change, it is then responsible for creating the appropriate environment to enable this change to occur.

Environment

Centralised, mechanistic structures do not create a good environment. Individuals do not have a comprehensive picture of the whole organisation and its goals. This causes political and parochial systems to be set up which stifle the learning process. Therefore a more flexible, organic structure must be formed. By organic, we mean a flatter structure that encourages innovation. The flatter structure also promotes passing of information between colleagues and so creating a more informed workforce.

It is necessary for management to take on a new philosophy; to encourage openness and reflection and to accept mistakes and uncertainty. Members need to be able to question decisions without the fear of reprimand. This questioning can often highlight problems at an early stage and reduce time consuming errors. One way of overcoming this fear is to introduce the possibility for questions to be asked and suggestions made anonymously.

Leadership

Leaders should foster the Systems Thinking concept and encourage learning by the individual and by the organisation. It is the leader must be ready to help team members structure their views if they need this help. For example, they need to help the teams understand that competition is a form of learning; not a hostile act.

Management must provide commitment and resources to encourage and support long-term learning. The organisation must be prepared to supply enough resources (money, personnel and time) to ensure that quality learning takes place frequently.

Empowerment

The term Empowerment means that the focus of control shifts from managers to workers. The workers become responsible for their actions; but the managers do not lose their involvement. They still need to encourage, enthuse and co-ordinate the workers. Equal participation must be allowed at all levels so that members can learn from each other simultaneously.

Creating a Learning Environment

The creation of a learning environment must be a conscious and deliberate exercise on the part of the organisation and the management structure within the organisation.



Learning

Organisations can learn to achieve these aims through small-scale models of real-life settings where management teams learn how to learn together through simulation games. They need to find out what failure is like so that they can learn from their mistakes in the future. These managers are then responsible for setting up an open, flexible atmosphere in their organisations to encourage their staff to follow their learning example.

To create a learning environment we need to:

- Analyse how learning takes place
- Encourage fast and smarter learning
- Provide a range of learning opportunities including problem-solving groups, job rotations, mentoring schemes, action learning projects
- Learn from what goes wrong i.e. acknowledge both success and failure learning
- Encourage experimental learning and risk taking
- Depoliticise learning by encouraging learning openly across boundaries
- Encourage a climate of trust
- Increase accountability for learning on an individual and group basis
- Set up appropriate control and reward systems to encourage learning and recognise expertise.

During the European Management Seminar in 2004, we organised an Open Space session on how to create a learning organisation. In the attachment, you may find the questions used and could take them for your own discussion.


Why Learning Organisations Work?

The People Develop

A learning organisation encourages its members to improve their personal skills and qualities, so that they can learn and develop. They benefit from their own and other people's experience, whether it be positive or negative.

Greater motivation

People are appreciated for their own skills, values and work. All opinions are treated equally and with respect. By being aware of their role and importance in the whole organisation, the workers are more motivated to "add their bit".



This encourages creativity and free thinking, hence leading to novel solutions to problems. All in all there is an increase in job satisfaction.

The workforce is more flexible

People learn skills and acquire knowledge beyond their specific job requirements. This enables them to appreciate or perform other roles and tasks. Flexibility allows workers to move freely within the organisation, whilst at the same time it removes the barriers associated with a rigidly structured organisation. It also ensures that any individual will be able to cope rapidly with a changing environment, such as those that exist in modern times.

People are more creative

There are more opportunities to be creative in a learning organisation. There is also room for trying out new ideas without having to worry about mistakes. Workers' creative contributions are recognised and new ideas are free to flourish.

Improved social interaction

Learning requires social interaction and interpersonal communication skills. An organisation based on learning will ensure members become better at these activities. Teams will work better as a result.

Teams and Groups Work Better

Learning organisations provide the perfect environment for high performing teams to learn, grow and develop. Such teams will perform efficiently for the organisation and produce positive results.

Knowledge sharing

"Openness Creates Trust"

A team is composed of highly specialised members who cannot and are not expected to know everything about a job. In this case the sharing of common knowledge is quite important for the completion of a job. Within learning organisations information and knowledge flows around more freely. This makes for higher productivity within teams and between teams as they build on each others strengths. Trust between team members increases and hence they value each others opinions more.

Interdependency

In any organisation people depend on each other for the completion of their work. Learning organisations will increase this awareness, and improve relations between people at a personal level. By knowing more about other people's roles, needs and tasks, members can manage their time better and plan their work more efficiently. This dependency is decreased as learning is enhanced, letting people get on with their own job better as they rely less on others.

The Organisation Benefits

An active learning organisation will have at its heart the concept of continuous learning. Therefore it will always be improving in its techniques, methods and technology.

Breakdown of traditional communication barriers

The old hierarchical manager/worker model has developed into more of a coach/team-member scenario. Leaders support the team, not dictate to it. The team appreciates this, which in turn helps them to be highly motivated.

All members have an increased awareness of the organisation's status, and all that goes on in other departments. Communication - between and across all layers of the association - gives a sense of coherence, making each individual a vital part of the whole system. Members perform better as they feel more a part of the organisation; they are not just pawns in a game.

Customer relations

An organisation's first priority is its customer's needs. A learning organisation cuts the excess bureaucracy normally involved with customer relations allowing greater contact between the two. If the customer's requirements change, learning organisations can adapt faster and cope more efficiently with this change.

Information resources

Over time an organisation builds up a pool of learning, in the form of libraries/archives and human expertise. This pool of knowledge within learning organisations is larger than average. New problems and challenges can be met faster using this increased resource.

Innovation and creativity

As more people at every level of an organisation engage in continual learning a valid contribution can come from any member of the organisation, and from any part of the organisation. Being innovative and creative is the responsibility of the whole workforce and allows learning organisations to adapt effectively to changes in the market, in technology and in competition.

Participants of the European Management Seminar identified:

The winning thing if we want to become a learning organisation

- More interaction between NSO representatives
- Fresh blood
- Use frameworks and give people responsibility inside the framework
- Youth empowerment
- Youth involvement
- "Outside the box" training
- People need to know what a "learning organisation" is so that they can benefit from the idea
- Be more open - "think outside the box"
- Empower young leaders
- Welcome support from other organisations
- Open minds

This creativity also gives rise to an increased synergy. The interaction between high performing teams produces a result that is greater than was planned or expected of them.



The key obstacles

- Long lasting leaders (40+ years)
- Tradition
- Complex organisational structure
- Wish to control everything
- Senior people are in the job for too long (no fixed term)
- Stagnation in roles
- Resistance to change
- Lack of flexibility

Risk analysis

There are certain risks which can affect whether you decide to change or not. Here is some advice derived from the theory and also from the European Management Seminar 2004.

From the theory

Risks if You Implement the Changes

- To be effective, the change must be dramatic – maybe even drastic – and not introduced slowly, as time is money
- Not all members want to learn and will resist the change
- The openness created endangers the trust between members
- Ignorance about learning; that is not following the proper learning cycle
- "Over the top": too much emphasis on learning and not enough on getting the job done
- "To encourage the learning organisation as the 'end' is an exercise in futility" – anonymous

- Too much freedom and information can create misunderstandings
- Information overload, too much to absorb at once "To love knowing and not learning: shallowness" – Confucius
- The culture of the country may be a disadvantage
- The perils of being a pioneer

Risks if You Don't Implement the Changes

- Survival of the fittest
- Overtaken by the competitors
- Become inefficient
- Fail to embrace new ideas and increase productivity

From the Management Seminar

Risks of implementing change	Solutions
We cannot know all the final results	Execute careful and thought out planning prior to change; this will ensure that you define the results you have achieved
People will agree to the principle, but not understand the concept	Re-educate people, improve training, provide tutorials, workshops and coaching
The situation can get worse than before	Again good preparation in planning will help this. We need well defined objectives, to evaluate the current situation
Relationships between people have to change and that can be frustrating	Inform and involve people in implementing change and take into consideration the consequences for them
We lose members who do not agree with changes	
Spend too much time and resources and the balance between these and the results will be unfavourable	Prioritise, focus on the key changes to make and the most urgent
We could move so fast that people cannot follow	Agree on a dynamic plan – how to move together, time lines and build a shared vision. Allow enough time for evaluation during the process
Create confusion, wrong image	Ensure various ways of communication and do not go back to what it was before (there should be a change)
We can lose the good things	Evaluate the current situation, describe what is good and keep it among priorities
The changes do not work, the process is not completed appropriately	Evaluate the results and identify real causes
Too much focus on the process of change and we'll lose other important areas and/or needs	Keep the global view on the organisation in mind, assess consequences of every step, do not block daily activity of groups

Risks of not implementing change	Solutions
You miss opportunities to improve it and you get stuck in the past	Identify causes of stagnation, talk to people about their needs, expectations, problems and show them that they have a chance to make a difference
Unmotivated leaders	
You stagnate and organisation collapses	
You can be seen as irrelevant to the potential beneficiaries	Freeze what's good and unfreeze what's bad
Organisation will become unattractive and we'll lose members or even not survive	Be aware of changes around you and what people want, see what is constructive. Use statistics to find out why people leave. Adaptation to environment is compulsory for surviving
No new ideas, no progress	Create a favourable environment, try to change attitude and work on obstacles

The Future

In the future the following areas will become increasingly more important:

Investment in Learning

There will be more emphasis on learning and hence more investment in improving individuals, teams and the organisation. There will be more emphasis on the ability to learn and take on board new ideas and methods. Training will be provided by people within the organisation who actually do the work. Training will no longer be a separate activity but an integral part of the teams in the organisation.

Advanced information and communication technologies

General access to the information highway (data stored and accessible using internet technology) will make information more available and to a wider audience. Barriers to learning, such as lack of information and the availability of material will be reduced. Learning organisations will harness this form of information and use it to their advantage. Workers, regardless of their status, will have access to information that previously only their managers had.

Knowledge is the Key

In the future, organisations will be based on knowledge and not just physical assets such as land or products. The most important worker will be a "knowledge worker" and workers will be judged on their ability to learn.

Learning Culture

Previous organisation cultures, which are based on position or hierarchy, will disappear. The culture of an organisation will be based on learning and the skills of individuals.

Customer-Client Relationships

A learning culture will help customers and clients understand each other's needs better. It will allow a greater degree of co-operation between customer and clients.

Conclusion



"Like it or not, the years ahead will be an era of change and competition".

"The only thing one can predict about the future is that change is inevitable".

Hopefully reading this has given you an insight into the Learning Organisation concept. With any luck it should have given you a few pointers and ideas to implement it in your own circumstances.

The perfect learning organisation is not an attainable goal. It is merely a desirable concept: there is no correct implementation of the learning organisation. Every organisation can continuously adapt and adjust and some will be better learning organisations than others, but every one of them has something new to learn.

Questions you may ask yourself when thinking about your situation and adopting the learning organisation concept (Questions used during the Open Space session on how to create a learning organisation, European Management Seminar, March 2004)

Peter Drucker predicted way back in the eighties that the best example of a large and successful information-based organisation had no middle management at all (Drucker, 1988). He likened such organisation as a large symphony orchestra. There is only one conductor-CEO, and every one of the musicians plays directly to that person without an intermediary, where each is regarded as a highly-grade specialist, indeed an artist. Today, this is becoming a reality. It works in the knowledge era because information that once lay with the top people is now easily accessible to all, primarily at the bottom, in the minds of the specialists who do different work and direct themselves. As research has shown, because the players in the information-based organisations are highly specialised, they cannot be told how to do their work.

Is your association then an organisation that is obsolete in terms of its management styles, systems and structures? Can we operate like a symphony orchestra? If yes, how?

Managers and leaders of the 20th century were trained as rational decision-makers, to plan, to organise and control. However in the 21st century, many of management issues and opportunities will be based on how to effectively manage relationships (Harvey & Buckley, 2002).

How do you respond to the new requirement of management?

Managers and leaders in the 21st century must learn to innovate and be creative in their problem solving and decision-making processes. Solutions which were workable in the past are creating problems in the face of today's complex management dilemmas.

Do you encourage your managers and leaders to think 'outside the box' and make many new mistakes for the sake of learning and innovation? How?

Some organisations have responded decisively to the changing environments, by transforming themselves from "elephants" to "fleas" (Handy, 2001). According to him, "the elephants are the large organisations of business and governments; the fleas are the technological start-ups and the new dot-coms, they are the small consultancies and professional firms, the self-employed experts and the specialty suppliers that service the elephants" p.29. The challenge for the leaders of the elephant is whether they can learn from the fleas and whether they can themselves grow fleas, or can fleas be developed to support the elephant?

How do you maximize the use of ICT to empower your volunteers and professionals for cross-functional team sharing of best practices, front line decision-making, product development, and integration of available technologies and organisational-wide integration of learning? What kind of systems and HR policies do you have to develop to effectively manage these knowledge workers?

Organisations are becoming a virtual workplace. ICT allows us to operate almost anywhere in the world. The potentially negative consequences include: limiting worker commitment; reducing the synergistic effect of team work, limiting direct supervision, focusing on outcome and less on process and loosening contact with key stakeholders (Harvey & Buckley, 2002). Trust is critical in a virtual team because traditional social control based on authority gives way to self-direction and self-control (Cascio, 2000). Members of the virtual team need assurance that all others will do their part and perform in a consistent, expected manner. One of the challenges in the minds of many managers and leaders is how to effectively manage individuals, professionals, volunteers and virtual teams when we don't physically see them? Perhaps there is a need to shift their focus from managing time (activity-based) to managing results (project-based).

How true is this for you, given that you are a non-profit organisation and operate in multiple cultures; do you have to apply the same rule by having to reinvent/restructure when the hierarchies, in some cases, have worked well in certain cultures? Can you still continue to be an "elephant" or can you function as "fleas"?

Many organisations have already reinvented/reengineered to flatten their organisational structures to respond quickly to their environments. The organisations that have done so were global companies operating in a single global market. They are by and large, profit-making organisations. CEO, Jack Welsh of the giant US Company, General Electric, is fond of saying, "If the outside environment is changing faster than the inside environment, the company is doomed".

Is your operating environment similar to the turbulent business environments of the corporate world such that it will not affect us if we do nothing? If not, what will be the implications or consequences for remaining status quo?

The rapid development and advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has given rise to the growth of knowledge workers. Evidence has shown that they will be the prime drivers of organisations in the 21st century as already described in this paper. As organisations move into the 21st century, the focus of many businesses is moving from the bricks and mortar, or tangible assets, to an economy of "atoms and air", or the intangible assets. These are the hidden value of the organisations (Harvey & Buckley, 2002).

How do you create a system or structure where the important need for a face to face interaction between volunteers, professional, teams and key stakeholders is balanced by the need for virtual flexibility?

Given the future of virtuality in organisation, work is what you do, not where you go (Handy, 1995). If there is an office in the future, it will be more like a clubhouse, a place for meeting, eating and greeting, with rooms reserved for activities, not people, according to Handy. In a virtual workplace, more of us will be spending time in virtual space, out of sight, if not out of touch. Most meetings will have to be scheduled well in advance. There is no time for unscheduled meetings as no longer will colleagues be in the office. The paradox is the more virtual the organisation, the more its people need to meet in person.

How will your office look like in the future? Will it be an office where work gets done or just a place for interaction?

Also:

How can you promote and ensure gender balance in management?

How can all members be motivated to get involved in managing the organisation?

Do young people have a say in the management of the organisation? Up to what level?

How do we make sure that your organisation and its management are representative of the community in which you operate?

This material was produced by the 21st Century Core Group, WOSM European Region.
We specially thank David Bull for providing a large part of the text and editing this material.
© 2007

World Scout Bureau - European Regional Office

P.O. Box 327

CH-1211 Geneva 4

Switzerland

Tel: (+41 22) 705 11 00

Fax: (+41 22) 705 11 09

europa@scout.org