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IS YOURS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

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THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION SURVEY

Abstract of the article by
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Is Yours a Learning Organization?

The idea and the concept in brief

In a world that is generating rapidly increasing pressures on organizations, it is more important than ever that companies become learning organizations.

Increasing competition, technological development, demands on sustainability management, social and political change and disruptive business models, all contribute to constant disruption and the need for evolution. In a learning organization, employees continuously create, acquire and transfer knowledge and help their company become resilient and agile and adapt to the unpredictable faster than its competitors.

But few companies have achieved this ideal. Why? Because many managers are not familiar with the steps required to build a learning organization. And they lack the tools to assess whether their teams are learning and how that learning benefits the company.

David Garvin, Amy Edmondson and Francesca Gino have developed a solution for this. To do this, you must first know the three building blocks required for the development of learning organizations:

1.   a supportive learning environment,
2.   concrete learning processes and
3.   a leadership that promotes the value of learning.

Then use the diagnostic tool '— the "Learning Organization Survey" — to determine how well your team, department, or the entire company is performing in each of the essential building blocks.

 By evaluating performance for each building block, you identify the areas that need improvement and bring your business a big step closer to being an effective learning organization.

The idea in practice

The authors recommend the following practices to improve learning in your team or company.

Identify areas for improvement

Indem Sie beurteilen, wie gut Ihr Team, Ihre Einheit oder Ihr Unternehmen die definierenden Merkmale für jeden Baustein aufweist, identifizieren Sie Bereiche für Verbesserungen. Der Vergleich der

Leistung verschiedener Einheiten innerhalb Ihres Unternehmens oder mit Branchen - Benchmarks zeigt ebenfalls nützliche Informationen.

For example:

A European public utility discovered that, compared with rival companies, it was weak in areas such as openness to new ideas, experimentation, and information transfer. This pattern wasn't unexpected for a public utility that had long enjoyed monopolies in a small number of markets. But the company wanted to step up expansion into new geographic areas. Its performance assessment provided evidence that to reach this strategic goal, it would need to concentrate heavily on changing its established culture.

Understand the Three Building Blocks of a Learning Organization

BUILDING BLOCKS	CHARACTERISTICS
1 A supportive learning environment	Employees • Feel safe disagreeing with others, asking naive questions, owning up to mistakes, and presenting minority viewpoints • Recognize the value of opposing ideas • Take risks and explore the unknown • Take time to review organizational processes
2 Concrete learning processes	A team or the company has formal processes for: • Generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information • Experimenting with new offerings • Gathering intelligence on competitors, customers, and technological trends • Identifying and solving problems • Developing employees' skills
3 Leadership that promotes learning	The organization's leaders • show willingness to challenge and discuss alternative points of view, • signal the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer and reflection, and • practice active questioning and listening.

With this assessment tool, companies can identify those areas in which they need to promote the exchange of knowledge, the development of ideas, learning from mistakes and holistic thinking.

There are two basic ways to use the survey:
- First, you can use them to get a quick impression of the work unit or project team.
- Second, several members of a unit can individually do the survey and compare their results.

In either case, the next step is to compare individual or group self-assessments with the overall benchmark scores of the base group of organizations. The benchmark data is layered for each attribute in quartiles — i.e., the bottom 25%, the next 25%, and so on—arranged around a median (see figure "Benchmark Scores for the Learning Organization Survey"). Once you've calculated your own [1]) scores, you can identify the quartile your scores fall into and think about whether they meet your previous expectations of where you stand.

After comparing individual or unit values with the benchmarks, it is possible to identify excellent areas and areas with "space for improvement". If employees in several units want to participate in the survey, you can also make the comparisons unit by unit or company wide. Even if only two people from different parts of a company compare the results, they can identify cultural differences, similarities and things that they can learn from each other. They can also determine whether their group - or even the company - is lagging behind in many areas. By bundling individual and group assessments, organizations as a whole can begin to address specific problems.

ON THE WAY TO CHANGE –
FOUR PRINCIPLES

The Authors' experience in developing, testing, and using this survey has provided us with some additional insights for managers that learning organizations can use.

1. Leadership alone is not enough.

By modelling adopted behaviors - open-minded questioning, thoughtful listening, considering multiple options and accepting them against common points of view - leaders will indeed promote better learning. However, learning-oriented leadership alone is not enough. The cultural and procedural dimensions of learning seem to require more explicit, targeted interventions. We studied dozens of organizations in depth as we developed our survey questions, and then used the tool with four companies of different sizes, locations, and missions. All four had higher scores in learning than in concrete learning processes or a supportive learning environment. Performance often varies from category to category. This suggests that the installation of formal learning processes and the cultivation of a supportive learning climate requires steps that go beyond the simple change of leadership behaviour.

2. Organizations are not monolithic.

Managers need to be sensitive to differences between departmental processes and behaviors if learning cultures in organizations are to build. Groups may vary in focus or learning maturity. Managers need to be particularly sensitive to local learning cultures, which can vary greatly from one unit to another. For example, an early study of medical errors documented significant differences in the scores of reported errors between nursing units in the same hospital, reflecting differences in norms and behaviors set by department heads. In most situations, a one-size-fits-all strategy for building a learning organization is unlikely to succeed.

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[1]) Simma & Partner Consulting provides you with the electronic survey tool and creates the evaluation including benchmark comparison for you.

3. The performance comparison is the decisive scorecard.

Just because an organization rates itself well in a particular area of learning behavior or learning processes doesn't necessarily translate to competitive advantages. Surprisingly, most of the organizations surveyed identified the same areas as their strengths. "Openness to new ideas" and "education and training" scored almost everywhere more than other attributes or categories, probably due to their obvious links to organizational improvement and personal development. A high score, therefore, conveys only limited information about the performance. The most important assessments of critical learning attributes are relative – such as how your company compares to competitors or benchmark data.

4. Learning is multidimensional.

All too often, companies' efforts to improve learning focus on a single area – e.g., more time to think or more use of post-audits and after-action reviews. However, analysis suggests that each of the building blocks of a learning organization (environment, processes, and leadership) is itself multidimensional and that these elements respond to different forces. You can improve learning in an organization in a variety of ways, depending on which subcomponent you emphasize – for example, when it comes to improving the learning environment, one company may want to focus publicly on psychological safety and another on time to think. Managers need to be thoughtful when choosing the levers of change and should think extensively about the options available. Our survey opens up the menu of possibilities.

The aim of our organizational learning tool is to open dialogue, not criticism.

All of the organizations we studied found that reviewing their survey results was a chance to look into the mirror. The most productive discussions were those where managers invested in discussing and wrestling with the impact of their scores, especially the comparative dimensions (differences by level, subunit, etc.), rather than simply judging performance harshly or favorably. These managers tried to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations and to paint an honest picture of their cultures and leadership. Not surprisingly, we believe that the learning organization survey is best used not only as a testimony or final result, but as a diagnostic tool - in other words, as a tool to facilitate learning.

The Authors

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The translation into German and shortening of the article was done by Elmar Simma, Simma & Partner Consulting.

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We look forward to your call, letter or e-mail.
We are happy to answer your questions and prepare an offer for support in the planning and imple-mentation of an assessment.

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