NIGEL PAINE

2nd Edition

WORKPLACE LEARNING

How to build a culture of continuous employee development

KoganPage

PRAISE FOR *WORKPLACE LEARNING*

"I have been involved with hundreds of organizations since the Covid-19 pandemic and it is clear to me that learning is crucial for their survival, but also to build their resilience. I love this book. It has really become the standard text on building learning cultures in organizations. The first edition was good, but this second edition is even better. Highly recommended."
Elliott Masie, Chair, The Learning Collaborative, and CEO, The MASIE Centre

"If you want to help your organization become more agile, resilient and responsive in these volatile, uncertain, changing and ambiguous times, then this book is an essential read, not just for L&D professionals but for anyone who is committed to supporting continuous improvement. The book sets out the context and practical steps required to facilitate the emergence of a learning culture in an organizational context and has been my go-to guide and source of inspiration. The book is a treasure trove, packed full of practical advice, tools and case studies to help you on your journey towards a learning culture. Paine shares his vast experience, research and practical knowledge to help you on that journey. It is a journey of self-discovery for all concerned, but a journey well worth investing in."
Mike Bedford, L&D professional and host of the *Well@D* Podcast

"An authoritative, comprehensive, contemporary guide to learning culture, brought to life with real case studies. An essential resource for today's HR, L&D professionals and business leaders."
Michelle Ockers, Founder and Chief Learning Strategist, Learning Uncut

"In *Workplace Learning* Paine helps us to understand what a 'learning culture' really is, the rationale, the benefits of it and how to build one. His honesty and opinions shine forth combined beautifully with research, as well as his thousands and thousands of hours working with individuals, organizations and institutions globally. Paine's examples and metaphors paint a clear picture of what is achievable when we step back from what we think we know and trust each other, and the power of unlearning what we think we know. A very easy read while being a must-read for anyone who works

in Learning & Development, as well as anyone in a leadership or aspiring leadership role who wants to create a truly effective organization of people."
Celine Mullins, Founder and CEO, Adaptas Training

"Once again Paine has put together a book that is both thorough and timely for the role L&D and learning culture must play in the future workplace. Through case studies, comprehensive research and thought leadership, he has created a must-have resource for every learning leader offering valuable insights and analysis of learning culture, and its role in the success of organizations of tomorrow."
Serena Gonsalves-Fersch, Global Head, SWO Academy

"I enjoyed the broad scope of *Workplace Learning*. It goes back to trace the origins of organizational learning and it goes around the world to seek out great examples. It is a book with authority and presence, and is the clearest explanation that I have read as to why a learning culture is more important in this turbulent and uncertain world than it has ever been. I believe passionately in this idea and have proved that it works. And if this book can help spread that message, then I am delighted to endorse it."
Garry Ridge, CEO and Chairman, WD40 Company

"Nigel Paine takes a systems approach to learning, which makes his recommendations eminently more likely to work for you. He has greatly updated what was already a perfect book by adding new case studies and an added comprehensive analysis of learning culture. He is one of the great research translators. Certainly one of the top ones I refer to almost daily. He takes complex and sophisticated research studies and boils them down into readable, actionable prescriptions. Don't hire high-priced consultants. Just buy this incredibly valuable resource."
Matthew S Richter, President, The Thiagi Group, and Co-Founder and Director of The Learning Development Accelerator

"Nigel Paine's *Workplace Learning* will become one of the most valued, referenced and quoted business books of the 21st century. Covid-19 has forced us into figuring out how to create a successful corporate culture. This must include continuous and innovative learning embedded in the daily workflow of all employees (who are now self-determined learners). This book includes it all – defining/differentiating corporate culture, learning organizations – who's really in charge, the L&D greats (i.e. Senge, The Fifth

Discipline), as well as illustrating how it can be done. The skills of the future are needed *today* and this is the book to help you figure out how to engage, educate & *empower* your workforce!"

Sharon Claffey Kaliouby, VP Strategic Alliances, Learning Pool

"Paine takes the reader through the rigorous journey of defining learning organization and culture all while providing strategies and concrete case examples. The L&D world is currently experiencing one of the single most significant tests of organizational learning and their learning culture, making Workplace Learning a must-read for any learning leaders with a stake in creating organizational learning cultures."

Matt Donovan, Chief Learning and Innovation Officer, GP Strategies

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SECOND EDITION

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To Dr Annie McKee

This second edition is respectfully dedicated to Annie McKee, friend, adviser, and mentor. She is a powerful advocate for better workplaces and the power of the scholar practitioner in helping change organizations for the better. We need higher-quality insight and more informed judgement to transform our workplaces into learning organizations. She set me a high bar and I have always tried to meet her exacting standards in scholarship and her capacity for generosity and compassion.

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PREFACE

This book was written out of a sense of frustration. I knew that the idea of a learning culture was really important and I could see that others agreed: lots of references, and lots of attention but not a lot of clarity. So, I went back to the literature and tracked the idea of the learning organization back to the 1980s and forward through to the present in order to point the way forward for the future.

I tried to answer three simple questions:

- Does such a thing as a learning culture exist? Is it the same as or different from a learning organization?
- If it does exist can you define it?
- If it exists and you can define it, is it important, can you build it, and does it make a difference?

Over the course of the research and the writing, I discovered much more. And I became increasingly bullish about the concept and its significance. Building a learning culture may be the one indisputable characteristic of organizations that will thrive in the 21st century. To build that organization requires thought about structures and processes, hierarchies and communities, as well as how you can help people build their lives and their careers in places that make them feel valued. This recognizes that an individual's growth and development ends up correlating with the growth and development of the organization as a whole. I realized early on that miserable people tend not to innovate! Toxic environments do not lead to growth or success either personally or organizationally. Purpose in work also leads to more fulfilled lives outside work.

There are countless stories that could not be included in this book, but I hope that the ones that I have included point to a strong and inexorable conclusion: that there is something important about developing a strong learning culture. It is a process to engage staff and a strong way to build organizational success.

I have tried to go beyond simply illustrating what a learning culture is, and offer practical first steps and a road map for moving forward. I believe in this so passionately that I want thousands of organizations to take their first steps

towards building learning cultures that reflect their own unique shape and aspirations. The evidence is increasingly clear, that self-regulated learning, coupled with creativity and social skills, build flourishing workplaces and individual fulfilment (Chavez, 2018).

The future of human potential is linked to creating individuals who are adaptive, resilient and creative problem-solvers. And the role of leaders in organizations is to facilitate this process and engineer those outcomes, not for a few staff, but universally across the organization. That process is synonymous with building a learning culture.

Reference

Michael Chavez, Head of Duke CE at a conference in Atlanta, February 2018 quoting Dr Vivienne Ming, founder of the Socos think tank, https://www.socos.me (archived at https://perma.cc/AM7G-B4HE)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without significant contributions to my thinking, as well as huge encouragement, from a large number of people. Some read early drafts of chapters, others helped shape my ideas; these were the brave ones who took on the unenviable task of helping these words make sense. I have a huge debt of gratitude to those who forced me to move from confusion to order. As always, I take full responsibility for any weaknesses or lapses of logic in this book, but fully extend my thanks to the numerous people who helped me make it as convincing as it could possibly be. There are many more on this list than I can individually name.

Those individuals and organizations that let me case study and interview were crucial for the book, as well as giving me a much clearer idea of what is possible in great, well-run organizations. I would like to thank Henry Stewart from the Happy Company, Ben Betts and Emma Sephton from HT2, and Kelly Palmer from Degreed for their time and commitment.

My great debt of thanks goes to Garry Ridge, the CEO of the WD-40 Company, where the conversations in the early stages really helped shape the ideas. And, of course, his company forms a key case study in the book. This connection to Garry was enabled by Sue Bradshaw of Blenheim Chalcot, who also read an early draft of the WD-40 case study. Both Beth Hall of the Cotton On Group and Simon Brown of Novartis willingly shared their expertise and insight. I owe them a debt of gratitude.

Rod Willis gave me invaluable help and the broad context for the really important concept of collaboration, and the tools he developed really work and engender the right kind of conversation and understanding. I also had incredibly helpful conversations with Naomi Lockwood and Tony O'Driscoll. Both helped clarify my thinking about the relevance of a learning culture to a successful organization. Don Taylor's book underpins my chapter on technology and he let me hack at his solid model for implementing learning technologies. Julian Stodd helped refine my thinking on trust and much else. I also picked Martin Couzin's brain on numerous occasions to help cement ideas in this book. Nick Shackleton-Jones challenges my thinking every time we meet. Discussions with Gillian Pillans, and her

insights into organizational agility, helped formulate the complex relationship between learning and business agility.

I have an outstanding debt to Dr Peppe Auricchio from IESE Business School for his enthusiasm, support and ideas. His model informs Chapter 10, and that chapter is the better for it. Mike Bedford read and commented on the new Chapter 1 – his enthusiastic support helped.

As always, I am amazed at the competence of Kogan Page's staff, along with their patience and support. They have been long-suffering over this project and my inability to decide, finally, when it was done and dusted. In particular, Amy Minshull, Megan Mondi and Lucy Carter gave me more time than I was due, but Stephen Dunnell my editor takes the gold prize for tolerance and support in equal helpings. I also want to thank Sophia Levine, who got this project off the ground at Kogan Page, while Anne-Marie Heeney helped me steer the second edition in a sensible direction.

I have sat at the feet of Elliott Masie for well over a decade having my thinking challenged and assumptions dashed to pieces. He is everywhere in the book. Long may it continue.

There is a name I cannot omit – that is Erina Rayner, who put up with everything, including becoming my ad hoc graphic artist for a while! She is the one person I never dared challenge or contradict, and the fact the book now exists is a testament to her tenacity, support and persistence. I should also acknowledge the spark and stimulus provided by endless conversations with Dr Celine Mullins, Michelle Ockers and Sharon Claffey Kaliouby. I relish these moments of clarity in a general fog of unknowing.

The staff at the University of Pennsylvania have been superb. Not one word of this book was written without imagining having to justify my assertions before my peers. Dr Annie McKee has been a boundless source of encouragement and support.

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Introduction

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies…

T S ELIOT, 'EAST COKER'

For the vast majority of people at work, many of the ideas in this book will appear beyond reach. Their experience has taught them to have low expectations at work, and that most organizations are relatively dysfunctional; most leadership is poor and self-serving, and learning takes place on a limited, need to know basis. If we look at the various reports that detail the number of employees engaged at work, the average percentage is around one-third. (See, for example, the annual *State of the American Workplace* report that is produced every year by the Gallup organization and *State of the Sector* produced by Gatehouse which covers Europe as well as the United States. Both reports are in their 10th year of publication and the needle has hardly shifted over those 10 years.) Work is tough, stressful and getting harder. Experience says this idea will never work or is an impossible dream.

This book explains and describes a different kind of reality that is diametrically opposite to most people's experience. That is why I am asking you to put the lessons from experience aside for a while, and to come with me on this journey. I think that TS Eliot made a profound point when he asserted that knowledge derived from experience can falsify. He wrote the words above in the middle of the Second World War, when hope was in short supply, and his experience of that world determined his bleak viewpoint and pre-judged his expectation of outcomes. But he overcame that gloom and found hope and energy, and I want you too to try to put that scepticism aside as you come on this journey to a brighter future. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has added an acute sense of urgency to this journey to a brighter future.

When we return to a post-pandemic world, we will need more resilient and human-centred organizations to thrive.

The simple truth that I am trying to establish is that, in the face of such dramatic changes in our social, political and technological environments, work must inevitably change as a result. There is a lag between the experience and the outcome, but there are organizations that point the way forward. The direction of travel is pretty much inevitable as part of the adjustment that has to take place for organizations to sur in this contemporary environment.

I am convinced, and I hope that this book will convince you as well, that the only possible way organizations can navigate the complexities and the disruptions of the current environment is to create a workforce wanting to learn, who are agile and adaptable as individuals, together with structures that enable and enhance that. The new environment is collaborative as work works best when people come together to share ideas, knowledge and potential solutions. A learning culture creates that agile workforce and helps build learning organizations. This is fundamental and important.

The metaphor that I use throughout this book is that a learning culture is an organizational gyroscope. Just as a gyroscope in an aeroplane allows the pilot to maintain a level flight in spite of turbulence and thick cloud, and maintain a constant sense of where the horizon is regardless of what is happening to the plane, a learning culture keeps an organization steady, facing in the right direction, and allows it to overcome whatever disruption it faces from outside. Having a constant reference to the horizon is just as important for those driving an organization forward through turbulence, as it is for those flying an aeroplane in thick cloud and high winds.

A gyroscope is a demonstration of two separate forces. The first is inertia, and the second is precession. The gyroscope stays level regardless of how the external environment in which it operates alters direction. Precession, on the other hand, means that the gyroscope responds to forces acting on it by spinning in a conical movement rather than perpendicularly. Both of these characteristics have their equivalents directly in the establishment and implementation of a learning culture. A gyroscope mirrors the wider world and helps those in control of the microsphere to sense the relationship to the macrosphere. The gyroscope is small but critical. Its role in an aeroplane is identical to a learning culture's in an organization.

This book will strongly argue that a learning culture is not a nice to have, or an indication of organizational maturity, although both of those things

are true. A learning culture will become the definitive pathway to organizational survival within the next 5 to 10 years. It is, therefore, worth addressing what a learning culture is, and how you might take steps to establish it in your own place of work. In difficult times, work will be more enjoyable, challenging and stimulating. That is a huge promise going forward.

The book will not apologize for taking you back to the beginnings of the discussions around organizational culture, and some of the seminal work that was presented in the 1980s and 1990s concerning learning organizations and learning culture. It is essential that we understand that context in order to be able to move forward in the present. It is pointless reinventing a wheel that was pretty solid when it first emerged. But it is also pointless taking ideas at face value that were built in a completely different world and imposing them without question in our radically different present. Therefore, the book attempts to move us forward and offer an agenda for action in the current climate and helps us make sense of what these concepts mean in their current reality.

I hope you find this book rigorous, accurate and above all useful. It is, like all my books, a deliberate and conscious pointer towards action rather than debate. I hope that the research that I have completed for you provides enough evidence to establish the credibility of the pathway I have sketched out, and therefore you can take action with some degree of confidence knowing that what I am illustrating actually works. The proof of that pudding is in the case studies embedded in the book. Therefore the action that emerges comes from the analysis of what works and what does not.

The journey to a learning culture inside a learning organization is not straightforward and will take time. But there are benefits to the individual worker and the company from the very beginning as you begin to look clearly at the kind of workplace you have created, and see, perhaps for the first time, what it is like to work inside it. As you decide on your most important first steps you know that you will make the working environment better and more productive.

Setting the context

The *Financial Times* had a prescient banner headline in February 2018 that concisely sums up, in only four words, the flavour of the age we live in. It encompasses any number of reflections on the current reality of life in the 21st century, from companies, governments and individuals expressed in

countless articles. It proclaims: 'The age of instability.' It is also the age of learning to counter-balance that instability.

The accompanying article refers, explicitly, to the turmoil on the world's largest stock markets but it has a more generic application. As certainties crumble, and large and small companies wonder who or what will be competing with them, and how they can maintain competitive advantage when there are no guarantees and no safe bets, leadership has to evolve to rise to that challenge.

Companies have no idea whether their biggest threats will come from an unknown start-up on the other side of the world, or from their known mainstream challengers. In the words of the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, given at a DoD news briefing in 2002:

> There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.

Leaders have to face both ways at once and lead through unpredictability, instability and volatility. Just as old business models have failed, old leadership models are beginning to fail. But it is not just about leadership; the way we structure and organize the workplace has to evolve alongside these other changes.

This is summed up by the writer and former corporate human resources and talent leader, author and coach Dr Linda Sharkey, when she claimed recently, at a Duke Leadership Experience in Atlanta, Georgia (12 February 2018), that human development in organizations needed to be rethought from top to bottom, and that included leadership development. Organizational structures also had to be redesigned to facilitate co-creation and innovation, and they needed to be able to emerge and adapt. Finally, organizations needed to simplify processes to lessen top-down control, unleash productivity and diminish hierarchy.

The three watchwords of this ambiguous future begin with optimism. If leaders believe that they can get to a better place, so will everyone who works there. *Optimism* leads to self-belief and confidence. Even if you do not know the answer, you can believe that you will be able to work it out. However, to 'work it out' requires the commitment and intelligence of everyone, not just a few people with senior executive roles. Therefore, the second watch word is *empowerment*. If you are scared to take a risk and feel someone is always over your shoulder ready to pounce, you will always play safe and never try anything different, and your organization will stumble.

Finally, we move into an era where *collaboration* is critical but never a given. This is our third key word. That is because we collaborate when we trust our colleagues, and we believe in the integrity of the organization. This implies that we have respect for their ideas and are prepared to challenge our own assumptions. And with collaboration and measured risk taking comes experimentation. The best and the most successful organizations will be the ones that constantly try new things, knowing that some will fail. Failure, when flipped on its head, is an intense learning experience. That is why the WD-40 Company asks of colleagues, 'What did you learn today?' and learning from failed experimentation is highly valued and widely shared.

The need to rethink work and learning is at the heart of this, but a different kind of corporate learning; one that is all-pervasive and self-generating. A learning culture does not simply imply a lot of courses, high investment in formal learning, or even a Corporate University, but widespread curiosity, and radical questioning of what we do and how we do it together with a focus on answering the questions behind the questions: double-loop learning. If you couple this with a fanatical desire to share and collaborate, and then experiment and articulate, you generate ideas and new knowledge that emerge from both inside and outside. So there is a constant process of building from outside in, and inside out. Top-down leadership does not begin to address any of these challenges and more often works against this process rather than supporting it. And, in the same way, current structures and focus do not enable organizations to react fast enough, or engage sufficient people with the necessary acute sense of urgency and commitment to move forward.

Where does culture fit in?

Part of the answer comes from an article for the blog Medium.Com written by the Director of Managed Services at the MCSA. He makes a simple point: if you want to transform your organization, you need to focus on its culture. He adds: 'Training and education is key to help explain to organisations how they can best navigate digital transformation' (Storrar, 2018).

Go one step further into self-managed learning, and then to self-determined learning, and you can move away from navigation and begin to deliver something far more important: acclimitization and deeper understanding. And digital transformation is no different from any other transformational change, it is just more pervasive. Storrar is on the right track, but he does not go far enough; learning is, perhaps, the only way that people can not just navigate, but also adapt and thrive in a world of rapid change. This is not just

something that affects what they do at work, it impacts their whole life experience. And if that process of learning is not just a solitary experience, but is shared across an organization, the process becomes that much easier to manage and extend. As Storrar says, culture is the key! And in an organization that has a strong culture of learning, where learning is valued and learning together is encouraged and facilitated, transformation is not a trauma but a process that emerges out of learning. Those organizations will find it easy to move from a culture of learning to a strong learning culture.

These conclusions do not emerge from a hunch, or guesswork, and are not hope over experience, but a conclusion based on systematic research and the collective wisdom of thinkers and practitioners. And we should be bullish about it because a simple conclusion emerges: if we want to equip people to cope with the future, then their willingness and propensity to learn and share that learning is at the heart of that process. Many leading organizations can show us the way.

A strong learning culture is a fundamental component for dealing with complexity and uncertainty. It can enable people to find pathways through and manage the new concepts and ideas that help them work out how to thrive in a world where the answers are not obvious. A learning culture can help people see how their assumptions are actually part of the problem, and block radical solutions that emerge from diverse sources. No other process substitutes for learning or replaces the need to focus on people and equip them with the skills and confidence to take charge and to work it out for themselves.

There is no real escape from the conclusion that lifelong learning and dialogue are essential ingredients for business success for the first time since the industrial revolution. The fundamental aim of this book is to make the strongest case possible, to prove the efficacy of, and the need for, an enduring learning culture inside every organization. In addition, this books aims to help and support those who want to take the critical first steps in building a learning culture in their workplace, and in so doing, create a sustainable model for change and transformation now and into the future.

Reference

Storrar, T (2018) Digital transformation – why culture is key, Medium.com (archived at https://perma.cc/6G3A-ACW4) 30 January]

PART ONE

Exploring the concepts of learning culture and learning organization

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01

What is a learning culture?

Intelligence is traditionally viewed as the ability to think and learn. Yet in a turbulent world, there is another set of cognitive skills that might matter more: the ability to rethink and unlearn. (Grant, 2021: Chapter 1: Prologue)

The world is fundamentally made of relations and events rather than permanent substances. Where we, as every other thing around us, exist in our interactions with one another. (Carlo Rovelli Helgoland)

This book, which is essentially on 'learning culture', deliberately steps away from the detail of learning in organizations, in order to look more holistically at how learning can impact day-to-day work. I needed a helicopter view to see clearly the swirls and patterns of interactions that learning sets up in organizations. This would have been impossible had I remained embedded in the flow of learning and development (L&D). The book is an extended conversation between the bigger flows of organizational life and the tributaries of learning and development. I wanted to explore the symbiotic relationship between the two and show how moving learning more firmly and conceptually into work could enhance that relationship in a way that impacted the performance of the whole operation. How we conceive and deliver learning inside organizations is much more complex than some assume, because it cannot be extracted from the context in which it takes place.

What I realized, as I began this exploration process, was that, in many instances, a huge gap existed between what organizations really needed to become productive and what an inwardly focused learning and development function thought was necessary and was able to deliver. The concept of a learning culture was a bridge across that chasm.

The more I looked, the more disappointed I became, as I realized that countless learning teams had missed a big opportunity to really transform the organizations that employed them. If you made no attempt to understand the organization you worked in, at a profound level, it was very difficult to do more than tinker around the edges of productivity and effectiveness. By focusing only on the three Cs of compliance, competence and content, you missed three additional Cs: culture, connection and commitment. There was little point in developing competence without building commitment, solidifying the culture of compliance without building a broader culture of learning, and focusing on delivering and developing content without building community in which to share it. Here was an entirely new agenda and it had to be fully worked out. That was the genus of the *Workplace Learning* book, and to deliver it I was forced to take a very challenging, alternative journey to the one I was used to and comfortable doing. I had to move outside the L&D function, looking at complex organizational flows. I was asking different questions and engaging more widely across the body corporate.

My research indicated that if you could build a learning culture and foster a commitment to self-development and curiosity, new ideas would inevitably be brought into the organization. If you could foster a strong sense of community and respect, within a climate of psychological safely and trust, those insights could be shared rapidly around the organization. New insights shared at speed would allow whatever action was necessary to be taken quickly. If you could constantly adjust the levers of the organization and draw on the diversity of the entire workforce, it would be possible to build something akin to an engaged organizational brain. At this point, the speed of action and the collective intelligence would exist in the connections between people, not simply in the smartness of individuals working alone. The whole was substantially greater than the sum of the parts.

When I interviewed the then CEO of Microsoft, Bill Gates, in 1995, I asked him what he saw as his main role in the company. He replied that Microsoft employed a ton of smart people, and smart people are convinced that their view is the only one worth considering. His role, he went on to explain, was simply to ensure that one, plus one, plus one of smart people added up to more than three. It has taken me years to fully understand what he was talking about! Ironically, it has taken a new CEO at Microsoft, Satya Nadella, for those words to be put into dramatic relief. And the key to it all turned out to be learning.

The brain analogy

There are about 100 billion neurons in the human brain, but each neuron is capable of making over 1,000 connections. Those connections are the seat of human knowledge and intelligence. It is the density of those connections that builds cognition (Herculano-Houzel, 2012). And indeed, by extension, not all brains are the same. The scaling up of brain mass does not lead to an equal scaling of neuron density (Herculano-Houzel, 2012), and equally, organizational brains are not all built in the same way and are not identical. The difference is that organizational knowledge is defined by cultural and structural decisions, not just the smartness of the employees. And for a learning organization, just like a human brain, it is the complexity of the connections that matters most. Knowledge can lie in the space between people, and what matters is not what one person knows, but the connections that qualify and amplify that knowledge. The organizational whole is far greater than the sum of its individual staff parts. A learning organization is not just about building a continuous process of individual learning, but ensuring that these individuals are better connected and more willing to share, so that knowledge is amplified and resonates. In that climate, the learning is triggered by curiosity, not compulsion, and can almost take care of itself. There is a habit of learning, not a catalogue of courses.

A dichotomy between individuals learning in an organization, and organizational learning, exists. The complexity of organizational learning is directly related to the number and density of the connections that individuals have, and how easy it is to exploit those connections to check, plan and problem solve. Organizational learning is the way the organization responds to turbulence, gets things done, and realigns. It is obvious that individual learning has to feed into organizational learning: you cannot have high levels of organizational learning but poorly skilled and equipped staff. But when you have an organization full of confident learners, who are empowered to learn but also willing to share that learning, and to ask smart questions when they do not know, you enter another dimension of capability. This goes beyond individual capability into organizational capability. Nothing could be more fundamental for a learning culture. What differentiates it from a culture of learning is the second dimension of sharing and questioning. An organization can offer lots of learning opportunities and encourage staff to avail themselves of those opportunities, but it remains locked in individual expertise rather than collective insight.

Firing and wiring

It is the connections between learners that transform an organization, allowing it to adapt and innovate in order to create something powerful and new. The power lay in the jet fuel of insight across the organization. At the heart of a learning culture was a learning organization. Rather like a human brain, it is the connection that the synapses make to each other that creates the complexity of consciousness, not the individual neurons. As Donald Hebb stated before he had any evidence that this was empirically valid, 'cells that fire together wire together' (Hebb, 1949). Memory and knowing are based on the formation of complex neural pathways. This is not a one-off instance, unless it is an extremely powerful event, but the pathways are created by the repeated firing of those neurons until they form links and strong connections. As Julia Krupic put in an article in the journal *Science*:

> Thus, neural connection must show some sort of plasticity – i.e., an ability to be modified based on the mutual firing patterns of interconnected neurons – in order to form memories and associations. Indeed, it has been shown that brief (hundreds of milliseconds) stimulations of interconnected neurons significantly improve signal transmission between the two, a phenomenon known as long-term potentiation (LTP). (Krupic, 2017)

In the same way, organizational plasticity aids organizational memory and intelligence and builds long-term potential. It is the process of sharing knowledge and expertise that creates the coherence and resilience in organizations and their workforces.

However, if you look at traditional organizational learning, there is very little focus or concentration on building those connections. It is mostly predicated on the development of individual competence. The network building is seen as a happy by-product. In some ways the advent of newer learning models, such as e learning, has reinforced the focus on solitary learning undertaken by individuals largely in isolation. The traditional learning community, which is an organic, batch-processing model, has been supplanted by a mass production of single cells of learning. Success is judged by the speed and efficiency of individual completion. This is often the only metric. If you take this to its logical extreme, it pushes people away from each other rather than connecting them, and it leads to competition between individuals and a lack of concern for one another's success.

Many organizations still reward individuals for beating other individuals, and teams are rewarded for doing better than other teams. A learning

organization is a long way from this model! In a learning organization, the focus and the rewards are linked to rapidly sharing knowledge and insight, and the collective well-being of the organization. Teams that share rapidly gain greater recognition (and reward) than teams that hoard their knowledge. And to parody Donald Hebb, teams that fire together with other teams wire the organization together. Access to help is readily offered, and managers gain kudos, not by their own performance, but by how much progress and development their team achieves. Therefore, a learning culture, by definition, spawns an organization that is greater than the sum of the smart people who work there.

Chris Argyris and the origins of organizational learning

The primacy of organizational learning was an essential conclusion developed by Harvard professor Chris Argyris when he first started working on knowledge transfer in organizations during the 1980s. His powerful conclusions are encapsulated in his 1992 book *On Organizational Learning*. And you could argue that we still have not entirely come to terms with those concepts today. His focus was far more on the way organizations were structured, and whether that structure inhibited or enhanced problem solving and productivity, than on individual learning excellence and skills development as a formal process inside organizations:

> Organizations do not perform the actions that produce learning. It is individuals acting as agents of organizations who produce the behaviour that leads to learning. Organizations can create conditions that may significantly influence what individuals frame as the problem, design as a solution, and produce as action to solve a problem. (Argyris, 1992: 8)

He has much more to say about the conditions than the processes. His focus was more on explaining the power and the contribution of social learning before it had been named (Argyris, 1992)!

Argyris preferred to define the outputs of organizational learning rather than the process. He claimed that organizational learning manifested itself in:

> organizational adaptability, flexibility, avoidance of stability traps, propensity to experiment, readiness to rethink means and ends, enquiry orientation, realization of human potential for learning in the service of organizational purposes, and creation of organizational settings as contexts for human development. (Argyris, 1992: 1)

This is a very rich taxonomy and it reflects individual learning in context, rather than as a thing in itself and subjugated to the overarching needs of the organization. The issue is not simply about the development of individuals, to which much attention has been given, but the development of the organization. This receives far less attention for the most part. The impact that the organization has on how problems are framed and solutions sought is crucial for future success. Argyris realized that learning which served 'organizational purposes' required connections across the organization as well as within the conventional departmental or cognate hierarchy. He called this phenomenon 'boundary spanning': learning across organizational silos and structures. This is the foundation stone of organizational learning and an identifiable and core characteristic of a learning culture. 'In particular, they must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right' (Argyris, 1992: 84).

Argyris identified the key players who could inaugurate and maintain these learning flows. They were neither the head of organizational development nor the learning leader. For him the key to this was the team manager. The manager's role and attitude were critically important. The implicit permissions that the manager gave could either transform and amplify the web of connections inside the organization or terminate them. A learning organization was the manifestation of these connections.

The impact of boundary spanning could be amplified further. If the boundaries were extended beyond the organization and into the customer value chains, and included suppliers, the extended workforce and aligned organizations, a powerful early-warning system and elaborate network of expertise would rise up. This has been called (notably in a recent MIT/Deloitte Research Report) the workforce ecosystem (Altman et al, 2021). The processes that Argyris describes are non-trivial. They challenge the values and the purpose of the organization, and therefore explore the fundamental assumptions about how an organization thinks of itself, the manner in which it is structured and the autonomy it offers its staff, as well as the value it places on them and their network of connections.

The antecedents

It is possible to trace these ideas back to earlier post-Second World War thinking about the quality of work life and the early industrial democracy movement in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The argument that a healthier and more democratic organizational culture improved

productivity emerged then and was extended and enriched in the 1960s and 1970s by a plethora of psychological research into collective participation and problem solving in the workplace and its link to human motivation. Obholzer and Roberts (2019) tracked the intellectual web that linked the London-based Tavistock Institute with a network of organizations and individuals who were dissatisfied with the Taylorian behaviourist model of scientific management. Scientific management with its time and motion studies eliminated individual initiative and minimized communication and connection. Indeed, in her 2018 book *Accounting for Slavery* the Harvard academic Caitlin Rosenthal (2018) traces the origins of that kind of human capital processing and accounting to the 19-century slavery plantations in the southern United States.

The impetus for this was built by developments in psychology and the work of individuals such as Fred Emery, Einar Thorsrud and David Herbert (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). This was a global movement that appeared to lose traction in the new century but has a second and perhaps more powerful lease of life now.

The emergent view was that an organization, far from being a mechanical construction, was much more akin to a living organism that could only survive 'by exchanging materials with its environment. That is, by being an *open system*' (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994: 37). That idea was captured by many, notably Alistair Mant and Bob Garratt (2010), when they talked about the concept of organizations as organic, not mechanical, systems. The metaphor they used described organizations as frogs rather than bicycles. A bicycle, it was argued, could be taken apart and put back together again. If you cleaned, oiled and tinkered with the parts it was actually better. On the other hand, when you attempted to take a frog apart, it had to be done with delicacy, skill and expertise just to ensure it survived. And even then, it would need time to recover and repair. The likely outcome of drastic surgery was the destruction of the organism (Mant, 1997). The metaphor was used, in part, as an extended attack on business process reengineering (BPR) and its concept of disassembling organizations and putting them back together to make them more efficient. This was an idea that emerged and died during that decade. See Grover et al (1995) for a discussion of the emerging anxieties around BPR and its lack of implementation success. The concept of organizations as continuously evolving, complex cellular organisms capable of growth and the absorption of new information from their immediate environment is fundamental to the concept of organizational learning and to the idea of a learning culture.

Deming's contribution

There was a focus on the interplay between the means to improve products, processes and services incrementally, and radical reinvention by establishing entirely new ways of designing, making and building products and services. The one fed into the other but begged the question of what was the link between the process of systematic improvement by error elimination, along with creating more accurate systems and processes to know more clearly what was actually going on, and the engagement and motivation of the staff in the organization who ran those processes. Edwards Deming showed that you needed the latter to manage the former (Deming, 1982). In order to sustain accurate and measured systems that could be consistently improved, you needed intelligent, committed and empowered individuals. For example, one of Deming's 14 total quality management principles was the need to eliminate separate quality inspection processes. This was because quality had to be built in rather than inspected out (Deming, 1982).

In some ways, this movement represented the diametrically opposite approach to Taylorism and his measurement of time and motion. Taylor attempted to eliminate individual choice and difference. He wanted to turn people into machines that repeated identical actions without thought or agency. Contrast this with Deming's vision of engaged and committed staff, actively contributing to an organization's success by offering up their discretionary effort. It is easy to see how Deming's focus, in the 1980s, on total quality and zero defects production techniques required a sentient workforce that was empowered to take ownership of its output and was proud of what it achieved (Deming, 1982).

Judgement models

By tackling the question of what a learning culture was from an organization-wide perspective, it was possible to clarify why it was complex and what elements helped to define the nature of a learning culture. I was concerned and committed to rescuing a powerful idea from drowning in a sea of over-simplification and misinterpretation. The term had begun to be used so often, and in so many different contexts, that it had ceased to have specific meaning. The idea of a learning culture had become merely some kind of 'badge of honour' that was gained only in the telling. To have a learning culture, you merely had to claim you had one. It became a synonym for

adding a corporate university or building some kind of academy structure. It became an indicator of increased investment in learning, or the investment in and the deployment of new learning technologies.

I was particularly anxious that the conflation of the investment in a learning experience platform with the emergence of a learning culture was rebutted. The myth, perpetrated by vendors, that technology, in itself, was the solution ran against all the evidence that I had assembled. Using technology to paper over the cracks in organizational culture seemed to fail in every example that I explored. All of the examples used could act as perfectly justifiable indicators of the intent to build a learning culture, but none of these was even close to delivering that essential, holistic model that had to be at the heart of the idea.

There is a fundamental process in building learning organizations related to models of mind. The social scientist Phil Tetlock defined three social-functionalist frameworks that are commonly used for making judgements (Tetlock, 2002). These dominant models of mind are: Preacher (believe you have the truth and must convince others by using passion and emotion), Prosecutor (win the debate using powerful arguments to systematically build up your case) and Politician (convince others, by engaging with them emotionally, to believe your point of view). All three approaches are about ignoring contradictory evidence that might challenge the view that is being advocated. They are, in one way or another, designed to stifle debate and drive acceptance of the dominant ideology. These are obviously appropriate in the pulpit, the court room and at election time. Each approach is used to convince, or bully, others into accepting your point of view. A learning culture embraces debate and contradiction to arrive at more complex decisions. It is about quietly examining the evidence and taking measured decisions that emerge from diverse viewpoints across the organization. This is what Adam Grant calls a scientific approach.

Adam Grant in his new book *Think Again* contrasts models of mind that are about convincing with a more nuanced scientific perspective. In his view, to come to new insight, you have to think like a scientist. In other words, focus on reasons why you might be wrong, question your assumptions and gather evidence that proves or disproves your point. You need to be willing to relinquish your point of view, if the evidence points in another direction. That is at the heart of the culture inside a learning organization. And that is the reason why learning organizations might be the most optimal structures to survive in the next decades. The scientific approach embraces contraction and challenge, being prepared to set aside cherished views and celebrate

diversity in order to get better and adjust better to a volatile environment. A learning culture is a transformation of the way we work and the way we organize work, in every corner of the organization. This is profoundly different, in every way, from installing a learning experience platform.

It is exactly what the Italian academic Sylvia Gherardi is getting at when she talks about seeking out views across the whole organization: 'In fact, the engagement of practitioners, their experience knowledge and their care for what they do may enhance workplace resilience' (Gherardi, 2018: 11).

She describes a radically different way of knowing inside organizations that is inclusive and challenging. She demonstrates that the mere accumulation of knowledge is insufficient to solve complex problems. The key is the sharing of insight and organizational knowhow. Gherardi suggests: 'Actionable knowledge – for changing practices – emerges when all actors agree to question the issues that are often taken for granted and are ready to address the contradictions and conflicts that might emerge in the process' (Gherardi, 2018: 20).

Learning organizations create and use actionable knowledge. And Donald Schön pointed out decades before: 'Letting conclusions emerge from the evidence was far more complex an idea than I have ever previously assumed' (Schön, 1984).

Your perspective, and your ability not just to solve a problem but also see the underlying issue, are critical for transformation, not just modification. Argyris argued: 'whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system, … the learning is single-loop' (Argyris, 1992: 8).

The difference between single-loop and double-loop learning is an enduring concept that defines an organization's ability to continuously remake itself, rather than endlessly repeat the same errors. And the movement from single-loop to double-loop learning is fundamentally about the culture of the organization rather than the smartness of the people who work there.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have tried to share the insights that emerge from this book. The enduring message is that we must embrace complexity in order to understand what a learning culture is, and extract and distinguish that concept from the more superficial ideas that define a learning culture as a quasi-marketing device or shorthand for an increased investment in learning.

There is a huge, enduring difference between a culture of learning, where learning is encouraged, and a learning culture, where the organization is able to move forward.

To cope with the uncertainty of the present, organizations need, not more learning *per se*, but an artery into greater agility, problem solving and faster thinking across the whole organization. This book explores the link between the development of human potential and how that potential can be crystalized for the benefit of the organization in a way that enables and enhances both.

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02

Where did a learning culture come from?

Context

Those who work in the area of people and organizational development need to be clear about what a learning culture is. The term is being increasingly bandied about with looser and looser meaning attached. It is clearly a good thing – but we do not know how good or why!

The purpose of this chapter is to take the concept of organizational culture back to its roots and then situate the concept of a learning culture within that frame. What is clear is that these two terms are not the same, but the conditions for the latter depend to a huge extent on the nature of the former. Poor organizational cultures with a lack of trust and disengaged staff, with a climate of fear at their heart, will never build the conditions for a learning culture, or sustain one.

That is not to say that a learning culture has nothing to do with learning. In the case study later in the chapter, I trace how a learning leader can work with the organization to build that culture, and there is much in the remit of a learning team that can make a huge difference in favour of or against a learning culture.

The trajectory of the chapter takes us through Josh Bersin and Towards Maturity's models for developing a learning culture and my own learning culture self-audit to help the reader shape their ideas and assist them on the vital first steps of the learning culture journey. Microsoft is used as an example of an organization transforming rapidly and consciously, under the watchful and dynamic eye of their new CEO, into a highly complex learning organization, as the company builds a deep and organization-wide learning

culture. A short case study is then offered to show the journey one organization took from a traditional attitude to learning to a serious and nascent learning culture.

All of the elements listed above provide some indication of the way to move forward if you are committed to redefining the culture of your organization and building a strong learning culture. No element has all the answers and there is no magic formula, but the combination of insights will help you along that journey.

The link between organizational culture and learning culture

What is organizational culture?

As soon as anyone speaks about organizational culture, one name leaps out from the extensive bibliography of the subject. That person really defined the field almost 40 years ago: the MIT Professor Edgar H Schein. His seminal book on the topic, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, is now in its fifth edition, having first been published in the 1980s. Edgar Schein's son Peter co-authored the fifth edition (2016) and points out the trajectory of organizational culture across those 40 years. That concept has morphed from 'being something everyone at work had a vague sense was guiding behaviour' to being 'touted as a firm's greatest virtue, [and] being leveraged for strategic change' (Schein, 2016). What was once barely articulated is now eagerly debated and actively managed. What emerged with hardly any conscious manipulation is now shared, developed and cultivated. What was implicit is now increasingly, and deliberately, explicit.

In a celebrated book that builds on Schein's research and ideas, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind* (Hofstede et al, 2010), the authors point out that each person manifests many layers of culture. It is not a single thing or a single experience. It has many layers. The first layer emanates from the country or countries an individual belongs to, and their region or ethnic group also has considerable impact on defining who someone is. Gender plays a part, as does the generation that the person belongs to. Their social class and occupation are also critical. The final level is 'the way employees have been socialized by their work organization' (Hofstede et al, 2010). This comes a long way down the scale of influence and is the last significant cultural influence. It is, therefore, impossible to discuss learning culture without at least an

acknowledgment of the role that all our cultural experiences play and how they inform and engage with organizational culture.

The software of the mind refers to the mental constructs and assumptions that we all build, in order to make sense of the world and our place within it. It is a unique attribute of human beings. And it is no less prevalent in an organization than in any other manifestation of culture. These mental models are built out of a number of elements. Schein lists 12 of them. They range from small, observable norms of behaviour, such as when colleagues greet each other, to formal rituals and celebrations which include rites of passage and traditions established when projects finish, or rituals surrounding outstanding endeavour or reward and promotion. It includes 'espoused values', which define explicitly the nature of the organization. Google's exhortation, 'don't be evil', is an example of one such value. They help define the rules by which the organization operates, and the climate both inside the workplace for its workforce as well as how the organization is experienced by customers and by outsiders (Schein, 2016: 56–58).

But what is organizational culture in the first place? Schein favours a dynamic definition of culture. He sees it as: 'The accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems' (Schein, 2016: 61).

The process therefore has 'accumulated learning' at its heart as 'beliefs, values, and behavioural norms' are absorbed and adopted to the point that they are unconscious in the organization and the individual (Schein, 2016: 61). At this point they become a way of being, rather than a way of knowing. But this process is never concluded. As circumstances change, the culture evolves and adapts almost seamlessly as new problems are solved, new people arrive or the external environment changes.

Schein has continued to explore organizational culture over a number of decades and his model has become – if anything – more complex over the years. But one factor is consistent throughout his research, and that is his belief in the primacy of the CEO. In an interview with Tim Kuppler, which is on Schein's Organizational Culture and Leadership Institute website (www.scheinocil.org) (archived at https://perma.cc/FX5A-Y58L), he claims that: 'if you are really dealing with a cultural variable, like the degree to which it is constructive, you really have to start with the CEO. You cannot change culture in the middle… the culture piece is owned by the CEO, whether he or she admits it or not.' This simple but striking point can be illustrated by looking at the huge changes in workplace culture in Microsoft since Satya Nadella took over the

company and began a massive change programme that is nothing short of transformational.

The change of CEO at Microsoft

Satya Nadella became the CEO of Microsoft in February 2014, replacing Steve Ballmer, who had been appointed by Bill Gates in the early days of the company and took over the CEO role from him in 2000. Ballmer had signalled his intention to retire in August 2013 and that six-month search for a replacement had led to much speculation about who would be named as his successor. The role was seen as slightly toxic as Microsoft was underperforming; however, many outstanding CEOs had been touted for the role including the former CEO of Ford, and CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes Alan Mulally, who is now on the Google board of directors. But when the name emerged, it was greeted with a degree of astonishment. Up until that moment, Nadella had been a well-respected senior executive in the company running the Cloud Services division. He was not a Ballmer insider, and was not well known to the outside world… and he had never run a company. So, the naming of Nadella sent shockwaves through the tech industry sector. The appointment was perceived as a signal that big changes were needed at the company and that a seismic shift for Microsoft was about to occur. Many saw this as dangerous, putting the future of the company at risk.

Although Ballmer had grown revenues by 300 per cent and doubled profits during his tenure, Microsoft's share price had stalled. It was no longer the poster child of Wall Street. While still being a huge, profitable corporation, its growth was slowing down and it appeared to rely on, essentially, 'old' technologies for the majority of that revenue (Nazario, 2014; Curtis, 2013). In a world gravitating from the desktop PC to the smartphone, Microsoft was locked into the past, and its attempts to gain a foothold, initially with its own Windows phones and then its purchase of Nokia, were both seen as expensive failures. Indeed, when Ballmer had been shown the first iPhone in a TV interview in 2007, he treated it as an alien object, and was reluctant to even touch it. And finally, having given it a cursory glance, he declared that it would fail in the market as no one would want a phone that did not have a proper keyboard with real keys! That interview appeared, particularly in retrospect, to sum up Ballmer as someone who was blind-sided by new technologies and simply 'did not get it'. And Microsoft was seen by many as a failing giant. No one was very surprised when Ballmer stepped down, but the appointment of Nadella was a completely different story.

In stark contrast with Microsoft was the fate of its once fierce competitor Apple – the inventor of the touchscreen smartphone. Apple's revenues had rocketed after the 2007 iPhone launch, and that process of rapid adoption created a shift away from tethered computers to a 'super computer in your pocket'. The rapid shift to wireless and mobile computing, together with a rapid uptake of social media, became a defining moment both in terms of technology and a younger generation's dominant lifestyle. So successful was this process that, by 2017, over two-thirds of Apple's entire company revenue came from iPhone sales. And its computer operating system, Mac OS, a competitor to the ubiquitous Windows environment, was updated every year, and grew closer and closer to the iPhone and iPad operating system, iOS. But unlike Windows the new version had been given away as a free download to its customers so the vast majority of customers were up to date, and this simplified support and software processes. Microsoft had to manage multiple iterations of its operating system, some of which (notably Windows XP) were nearly 10 years old. This turnabout in Apple's fortunes transitioned it from a niche player, for a time at least, into the largest company in the world by market capitalization, a status once occupied by Microsoft at the turn of the 21st century.

Now Microsoft is roaring back under Satya's leadership. *Fast Company* published an extensive interview with Nadella by Harry McCracken, the technology editor for the journal (McCracken, 2017). It is a sympathetic portrait of a CEO who is in the process of transforming that company. During his brief tenure, Nadella has already added $250 billion to the value of the company, with net income tripling to 15 billion dollars a quarter (Statista, 2021). This is a remarkable achievement in its own right, particularly as most of that revenue has come from leveraging and combining existing products to build integrating services, but this is not the focus of the article on Nadella; it concentrates not on his business strategy, but on cultural change inside the company.

The article recounts how, before he had his first executive meeting, he asked his senior management team to read one book: Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* (2015). It is a book about the power of empathy and indicates how an individual can develop sensitivity towards others. With chapter headings such as 'Communication that blocks compassion', 'Observing without evaluating', and 'Expressing appreciation in non-violent communication', it espouses a four-part communication model that involves: 'what I observe' and 'what you observe'; 'how I feel' and 'how you feel'; 'what I need or value' and 'what you need or value', and finally 'the concrete

actions I would like taken' and 'the concrete actions you would like taken'. These are expressed in terms such as 'would you be willing to…?' (Rosenberg, 2015: 266), rather than handing out instructions. It would have been the clearest signal possible, to Nadella's top executives, that things were going to be different, and the new culture in Microsoft would be far less abrasive and much more empathetic. The interviewer sums this up as:

> Nadella's approach is gentler. He believes human beings are wired to have empathy, and that's essential not only for creating harmony at work but also for making products that will resonate. 'You have to be able to say, "Where is this person coming from?" he says. "What makes them tick? Why are they excited or frustrated by something that is happening, whether it's about computing or beyond computing?"' (McCracken, 2017)

In Nadella's time as CEO a whole raft of new, redefined and repurposed products have appeared, both hardware and software, and the company has shifted its focus to the cloud and cloud-based services. Alongside the new approach inside the organization has been a new alignment outside. Nadella is as interested in how a Kenyan internet café is using and innovating with Microsoft products and services, as he is in domestic or corporate use. He is as proud of a book-reading software application, developed by a team in the Microsoft Research Centre in Istanbul, as he is in Redmond-developed software. His vision is holistic, and he appears to care about making the world a better place. And this new focus seems to be paying off handsomely. It is also hard, talking to Microsoft staff, to find anyone who has a harsh word to say about Nadella. He is widely respected and, just as Schein indicated, the culture has changed from the top and is now resonating through the whole company. This makes very good business sense and has created a sense of purpose, commitment and mission for the company, once again.

Nadella is a serial learner. His office is full of books; he reads constantly and expects his staff to as well. And his interests range far more broadly than the technology sector to which he belongs. This is clear from his choice of Marshall Rosenberg's book for his senior staff. So at the heart of Microsoft now is a man with a humble approach, engaging with the world and attempting to learn from others. He wants to stay in touch with changes in Africa as much as in Washington State, and a strong remit to learn faster and to share.

At the heart of the organization that Nadella is building is a fundamental learning culture, changing the organization from top to bottom, that will enable the company to react far faster to changes in its external environment than it was able to in the past. In his book *Hit Refresh* (2017) Nadella outlined the

core components for his vision for Microsoft. Essentially, he outlined the three business-critical principles that defined his journey in the company. The first was to stimulate the curiosity and desire in all staff to meet a customer's unmet needs. The second was to create a framework for actively seeking diversity and inclusion. Finally, his aim was to reconfigure Microsoft as one company, not a confederation of separate organizations. This was based around a culture of empowerment and curiosity. The know-it-all company, replaced by the learning company.

Organizational culture and learning culture

We need to be able to differentiate between organizational culture and learning culture. They are clearly related, but they are, equally clearly, not the same thing. In this respect, it is useful to begin by discussing the work of the celebrated University of Pennsylvania Professor of Anthropology Greg Urban. He muses in an article that he wrote in 2007 about the continuities and differences between car models as they evolve over time (Urban et al, 2007). His focus is the 2004 Jeep Grand Cherokee. Car manufacturers always tout a revised model as 'new', but invariably it has the look and feel of the manufacturer, as well as the previous evolutions of the brand in past model years. Urban notes this seeming contradiction, and then explains it in cultural terms by redefining the concept of a 'shared cultural model'. Ironically, when corporations are shown those evident 'cultural continuities' they are disappointed! They prefer the image that constant reinvention suggests: 'Even when continuity is patent… they tout newness and innovation, seemingly denying the powerful role of the past as a force shaping the present.'

This perception encouraged the author to reject the enduring concept of organizational culture developed and refined over the last 50 years. The 'shared culture model', similar to the definition given by Edgar Schein above, is replaced by a more complex and uneven idea of culture. Urban sees culture almost as a virus. It is contagious and passes from person to person but unevenly. Some get completely contaminated, while others are not touched at all. It can also leap from one community or geography to another very fast, and the patterns of contagion are varied and complex. He calls this 'a circulatory model' because the transmission of culture is uneven. Permeation is not consistent as people absorb myths in varying degrees, and as cultural elements are absorbed they are reshaped in the same way that stories are

reshaped in the telling and their movement is complex, straying often beyond their defined grouping into new areas. In Urban's words: 'The myth told by b to c is not precisely the same as the myth told by a to b… This is also a premise of much of the research on globalization of culture' (Urban et al, 2007).

For Urban, we can surmise that a learning culture is a natural cross-check inside an organization; it maintains, but also holds to account, the overall organizational culture. It does this by reference to the outside world. A learning culture seeks meaning and reference from outside and ensures that knowledge and insight gained is rapidly transmitted around the organization. A strong learning culture is the antidote and the enabler of Urban's 'circulatory model'. It holds the culture to account, while also acting as the transmission medium for new ideas and new realities and the agent for change. So, a learning culture feeds off organizational culture, but also ensures its evolution and longevity. And in a fast-changing world, it may be the only way that alignment can be maintained inside an organization, and between an organization and the outside world.

That is the reason I developed the idea of an organizational gyroscope. It stands as a metaphor for the way that an organization stays aligned, both internally and with the external environment. Gyroscopes are stunning pieces of equipment that allow you to hold one side without the device falling over. It keeps everything steady and balanced and seems to defy gravity. As mentioned earlier, without gyroscopes planes could not fly safely.

A gyroscope, like a modern organization, is in the process of constant adjustment. And a learning culture stops an organization collapsing because, when turbulence occurs, it helps the organization regain its own equilibrium and navigate the terrain ahead. That process of holding a culture to account avoids atrophy and ultimately, therefore, avoids oblivion. And as the world outside changes faster, the learning gyroscope becomes more and more necessary as a tool to maintain a balance, while adjusting to those external changes. It is, critically, about moving forward without too many shocks and without too much turbulence. It is, after all, always better to know which way is up!

Building learning cultures: a conversation with Naomi Lockwood

I spoke to Naomi Lockwood, a learning and OD specialist with huge experience of corporate L&D in a career spanning roles in an NHS Foundation Trust, a pharmaceutical company, and an examination and testing body.

Her first point was to emphasize that the key to developing a learning culture was to work hard to shift traditional and often transactional training and development functions, into transformational learning and development (performance enhancing) teams. It is often the case, in the former model, that what is on offer, as learning, is a catalogue of courses that can be selected and taken. Staff are often given the option of choosing around one or two programmes a year from the catalogue, making the choice sometimes on what looks interesting, rather than what is useful in terms of their job skills or role. In this instance, learning teams are on the fringes of the organization, a long way from strategy development and the corporate centre, but nevertheless trying to do good work, without the traction or the connection necessary to make a real difference.

Naomi has a track record of putting learning centre stage, and she does this not by offering more of the same – a fatter catalogue – but by developing cultures of learning across the whole organization. This changes everything, fundamentally, in terms of the role of the learning team and requires a shift in perception from them, the corporate centre and the rest of the organization.

This transition for learning teams is about working in partnership with the organization, by helping to achieve its goals and aspirations, rather than operating as an independent group outside the dominant direction of travel of the organization as a whole. In other words, learning strategies have to be developed that not only support and enable organizations, and the people within them, to perform at their best and achieve their potential, but to extend that role into building cultures of learning. She believes that a learning culture is owned by everyone and built by everyone. It cannot be imposed.

In Naomi's experience, three critical elements are required to build a learning culture and they fit in to a convenient acronym: ART. A learning culture develops when the learning is in *Alignment*, has *Relevance* and is *Timely*.

Alignment

This is a baseline for learning strategy: whatever learning is offered, it has to be completely aligned and contribute to the achievement of the organizational strategy. The way that you ensure this is by really getting under the skin of the organization at multiple levels – by asking questions such as: what is the organization's fundamental purpose and what is it trying to

achieve? What are the frameworks of expectation here (job descriptions, performance management frameworks, strategies, values frameworks, competency frameworks)? What do people need to know that will help them get things done? What is stopping them now? How is learning viewed by key stakeholders?

If learning professionals do not understand these expectations, it is unlikely that whatever they build will ultimately be fit for purpose. Naomi's approach, therefore, goes further than arguing for an 'on paper' alignment between the organizational strategy and that of the learning team. Her model calls for an alignment of language, alignment to organizational culture and individual aspirations, and to the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the business.

Alignment is the key to shifting learning from its position on the periphery, in terms of perception and impact, to one of a core contributor of value. And shifting the output of learning from individual choice to a corporate and strategic imperative makes it a key player that can reinforce and enable the strategic direction of the company.

Relevance

Relevance is also a fundamental component. Learning has to directly help people execute their role, and it should enhance their performance. It is verging on self-indulgence if this is not the focus. In addition, any learning organization has to take account of and build on how people learn in practice, both inside and out of work. This means understanding where they go to solve problems, gain knowledge and skills, and use this direction of travel to help build capability. This is the point where greater integration occurs between the formal learning programme, informal and social learning, together with learning on the job (in essence, the 70:20:10 model).

As people's access to information and technology changes, both at work and at home, the modes of learning provided by the workplace should also evolve. In an app-centric, mobile and Google-search dominated world, our learning is immediate, delivered at the moment of need and is sufficient for our purpose. It should be no less impactful when learning at work.

It is also important to figure out who is doing the learning and for what purpose. There are many instances in classroom-based or virtual classroom learning where a participant says, 'I am not sure why I am here, but I was sent here by my manager'. These are the people who often do not see or understand the relevance of the learning for them, and it is of questionable value for them. They are hardly present.

When people undertake self-directed learning – from Googling something to watching a YouTube video – it is usually perceived as relevant because the purpose is clear: it is to solve an immediate problem, answer a pressing question, or gain an alternative, expert viewpoint. An L&D team needs to build on these insights. Organizations that wish to develop cultures of learning need to adapt to the needs and the current experience of their learners and this often means minimizing the times you send people away on training courses. The key role for an L&D team is to enhance relevant learning, not multiply the instances of irrelevant learning. The team can add most value by understanding and engaging with what the individual does outside the workplace. There is an apparently unstoppable trend towards self-directed learning and towards self-managed learning, and augmenting it in line with organizational strategy and individual development goals. Learning needs always exceed what it is possible for the organization to deliver, so the learners have to remain in the driving seat in order to work out their own priorities.

Timeliness

Timeliness is the third pillar and is a crucial element of the full process. It is possible to exploit the pace of technological development to prioritize 'just in time' learning. This is simply fulfilling expectations rather than doing anything radically new. L&D teams can add value to people and organizations by ensuring anything they curate, contextualize, develop or deliver happens at the right time for the right people. The focus should be on getting it to the right people at the right time, rather than imposing a fixed timetable of delivery or dishing out learning on a 'the more the better' principle.

One example of old and new thinking is how induction for new starters is handled. The focus should be on timely delivery of what is needed to ensure the individual gets up to speed as quickly as possible, thereby ensuring optimum performance in the shortest possible time. Booking someone on a face-to-face induction two months after they start work, because the programme needs a minimum number to be viable, and then delivering set content, regardless of need or concern, is largely ineffective and a waste of time and money. Induction should be timely, targeted and individualized in order to add real value and do what it is supposed to do, ie introduce staff to the organization that they have just joined and prepare them for a specific role within it. That is what the organization needs from induction. It is more useful than setting up a three-day face-to-face course regardless, and then running it once every three months, irrespective of how many people started work and when.

Using the ART model

How do you use the ART model? In other words, how do you work out what Aligned, Relevant and Timely means in your organization's terms? The key to this is to build strong links between the learning organization and the rest of the business and thoroughly engage. And the best way to do that, in multiple industries and different-sized organizations, is to take the time to engage at multiple levels, and then listen carefully to what you are being told.

Naomi Lockwood found that surveying every member of staff to understand what would make the most difference to them was hugely profitable. The focus was always on what would enhance people's performance and help them realize their potential – not asking them what training they would like, or worse, attempting to sell programmes that had been pre-agreed by the learning team into the organization. Instead of creating a long wish list to add to the training catalogue, it is imperative to try to understand where the blockers to performance lie and deal with them first.

She also spent time engaging senior leaders, including the board, through a process of inquiry and conversation, trying to understand their vision for learning and development and beginning to articulate that on their behalf, so that it became her vision. She used the frame of learning to understand and reflect back the organization to key influencers.

In large organizations, Naomi has used the World Café approach invented by Juanita Brown. This enabled groups ranging from 10 to over 500 participants to have coherent and focused discussions on specific topics. World Café is a defined process that encourages groups to build on each other's insights rather than work separately. The process has multiple benefits, including getting quickly to a shared vision, and creating an organizational buzz about the power and potential of organizational learning, while also generating lots of data. If the focus is on learning it can reveal what a learning culture needs to look like in the context of a specific organization. And that provides a simple agenda for action. Once agreed, it is then possible to create a comprehensive plan for the development and the activity of the learning team.

This collection of data, together with trying to understand the evolving organizational context, is a continuing rather than a one-off process. In addition, it is important to identify people in the rest of the business who simply 'get it'. They are the trendsetters and the influencers, and they usually have an acute sense of what needs to be done. These are the ones who

should be recruited as champions and spokespeople to sell the ideas and the benefits of learning to the rest of the organization and act as role models. This coalition can go a long way to ensuring that learning and the learning team remain aligned, relevant and timely.

In addition to this process of securing an agenda and building relevance into the L&D offering, and core to the underpinning philosophy discussed above, are three critical enablers of any successful learning culture. The first of these is to secure the backing and active support of leaders and managers. Secondly, the organization needs to develop reflective practitioners alongside the third enabler, which is an engaged and proactive L&D team.

On more than one occasion in this chapter, it has been acknowledged that leaders and managers are crucial to the development and future success of any learning culture. If they do not take it seriously or flagrantly disregard the necessary behaviours, success going forward is almost impossible. As an example, quoted by Naomi, when you hear staff in organizations arguing that they do not have time for learning it often masks a conflict with their line manager. When you explore a little more deeply, it is the line manager who has no time for learning rather than his or her staff. In this instance, individuals feel they dare not engage in formal learning as it is a career-limiting activity. It is, after all, managers who dedicate resources and investment within their teams, and often decide on promotion or reward.

Where leaders and managers are on board, they often create a positive climate for the learning and development of their staff. This does not mean merely signing off training request forms via a learning management system, but rather understanding what kind of learning will enhance performance, meet individual motivation and unleash potential. And the best leaders and managers approach this holistically and understand that all solutions should include both formal and informal learning as part of a balanced mix, and couple learning with other kinds of challenges to help individuals move forward in their career. It is clear that a culture that promotes and supports learning is a sine qua non for a learning culture but it does not equal a learning culture.

These managers and leaders are the ones who encourage and support continuing development throughout the organization, partly by offering sponsorship, and partly by what they say and what they do. The opposite is also true: their negative behaviour can wreck any initiatives. If they are not brought on board, and if they see little value in what L&D is offering, or its positive impact on the team's performance, their opposition is almost impossible to overcome.

The second enabler is the need to develop reflective practitioners. If any learning culture is to flourish, there is a real need to reflect on what has been learned. This is partly about quietly trying to work out how the new skills or insights might be used to overcome some of the current work challenges, but also to think about how learning can challenge current assumptions. At a time when organizations need to become more adaptable and agile to survive, building reflective practitioners should be core to this process. We also know that the brain needs quiet time to process and build strong connections as it tries to make sense of the world (Royal Society, 2011). And it is also clear that reflective practitioners should not just emerge from the senior leadership. Organizations need reflective practitioners spread throughout the business.

An essential element of any learning organization is an established belief that learning is important and should happen all over the place, all the time, and not be focused on courses. The concept of the reflective practitioner implies that any insights gathered, and learning nuggets collected, can be captured, discussed and disseminated and find their way quickly into work. The aim is to encourage better and better performance, essentially owned and driven by everyone in the organization. The CEO of the UK's Learning and Performance Institute, Edmund Monk (2017), described it simply as 'learning is everywhere'.

Creating an environment where people are true citizens of a learning culture means that, for them, each interaction, conversation, meeting and exchange is seen as a learning opportunity. There is a role for L&D teams in supporting and disseminating this. For example, they can offer practical guidance on how to encourage reflective practice. Reflection time can be encouraged at the end of a meeting, before everyone leaves the room, maybe only for five minutes, to discuss, consider and agree what has been learned. L&D can encourage staff to keep journals, video logs or simply write down insights on sticky notes before they are forgotten. Allocating time at the beginning or end of a day (or both) just to think about what you have learned, or what you need to accomplish, can be performance enhancing and developmental. These things are small nudges in themselves, but contribute hugely to developing and reinforcing that culture, as they evolve into corporate habits and become the way the organization does things and defines part of the organization's values.

The third aspect is the evolution of the learning team. In order to keep up with changing technology, increasing complexity, globalization and the

nature of work itself, learning teams must change. Every element of what they do has to be reviewed and modified. Their focus shifts to concentrate on how the organization can be helped to perform better, not how many courses can be run in a given time span.

In Naomi's experience, she has often found that traditional L&D teams are made up of trainers delivering courses, often without any alignment to organizational strategy. Even more limiting are those teams consisting of (often very enthusiastic) L&D professionals who simply commission other (often external) L&D professionals and act only as form processors and administrators. They are at two stages removed from the direction of travel of their organization.

The growth of L&D as a profession, and the enabling of the role of L&D professionals, should be predicated on their ability to facilitate organizational learning, and encourage, sustain and enhance cultures of learning. It is important to build both the capacity and the capability of internal teams wherever possible, so that they can get alongside their organizations to ensure that learning is aligned, relevant and timely. It is almost impossible to outsource that process.

The skills of the new L&D professional are different to those of traditional trainers, and include: facilitation skills, research skills, consultancy skills, marketing skills, influencing skills, digital content development, curation skills and creative skills. However, that skill set should go further to include process skills, such as working in partnership or stakeholder management, together with coaching and performance optimization, as well as programme management, user design, user data analysis, and even selling or negotiation skills. Finally, all learning professionals now need a deep understanding of how to encourage, sustain and promote the power of learning through experience.

If, ultimately, L&D teams are there to optimize performance (individual, team and organization) they have to understand how to work with leaders and managers to help them improve the performance of their teams. Ultimately, the ability to work with leaders and managers to shift the needle will encourage lots of small conversations to take place all over the organization that focus on performance. The implication is that these discussions will occur at regular intervals and should replace large, unwieldy appraisal conversations that happen once a year. The generation of a learning culture has the L&D team at its heart but they do not own it. This is a fundamental element of the new L&D function.

Summary

By developing a culture that encourages asking questions, reflection on practice and asking for feedback, most employees are more prepared to openly admit what they do not know and ask for help. This in turn helps build trust and encourages widespread curiosity and rapid innovation. This process does not need much in the way of formal structure, or people with specific roles, to manage it. It emerges naturally out of the day-to-day interactions among staff, in their teams, and with their managers and leaders.

In the light of this, the role of the learning team becomes much more about the contextualization of learning and making resources available at the right time and for the right duration. These teams no longer post 'playlists' of courses but create personalized and focused learning. This shifts L&D from the periphery to the centre of the organization. It encourages staff to act differently and do their work more effectively. Therefore, the process enables the organization as a whole to respond to change and manage it better. In an increasingly volatile external environment this process becomes an essential element rather than a luxury.

Learning and innovation

Depending on the context, it is sometimes necessary to practise L&D by stealth. Learning must sometimes be aligned with the risky edge of innovation. It should be encouraging experimentation within a safe space and helping those staff who have traditionally focused on always getting it right to find the right place and the right opportunity to take small risks and mount small experiments and accept getting some things wrong. The aim is not to jeopardize the core business but to enhance it in a systematic way – by creating patterns of inquiry, learning and reflection that occur around the core, with minimum disruption, until the core itself is changed.

The creation of a learning culture is, in practice, a fundamental shift that emerges from and also changes the overall culture of the organization. Building cultures of learning increases the switch towards recognizing the power of learning that is more social, informal, aligned, relevant and timely. It is embedded in the way people behave and helps shape how people react in that culture. In this way it becomes part of the fabric of the organization.

'Building a culture of learning' does develop agile staff who have a collaborative mindset and a willingness to share. These are the by-products