



Pacific Corporate Training and Development Solutions

Organizational learning occurs one person at a time, but the system has to support it ...

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In an era of rapid change and increased customer scrutiny, it's no surprise that the organization's ability to learn and adapt is key to survival. Learning stimulates the change and ongoing improvements needed to maintain a competitive edge.

The story of any learning organization is really a story about people and their capacity to learn and make changes in behavior. The challenge facing many organizations, and the goal of many improvement initiatives, is how to tap into the potential that can be gained from widespread, non-stop, breakthrough learning. This is not easy, as the learning process is often inhibited by our own experience and subsequent beliefs about how to succeed, or at best avoid failure. Perhaps without knowing it, we have actually helped to create the organization that so often is the scapegoat for all our shortcomings and disappointments. Learning how to recognize and challenge self-limiting behavior and develop new working theories of living and working is not easy, but it can be done.

This article is about one barrier to **organizational** learning--the fear of incompetence--that can paralyze individuals and subsequently the organization and how it can be overcome. Let's start with an understanding of how learning and improvement are linked, and how learning can be inhibited or stimulated/supported.

The link between learning and improvement -- As defined by Webster, an organization is nothing more than the state of being organized. It is the willingness and ability of people to learn that accounts for the incremental and fundamental improvements in performance. It is the willingness and ability to

learn that makes solving difficult problems easier and the discovery of the unknown possible. In an environment where learning and its application to achieve desired results are valued above everything else, people's concerns about right or wrong, what the boss might think, ownership, recognition, and one's performance appraisal fade into the background. In a learning environment, the foremost desire in everyone's mind is to work as a team, satisfy customers and be profitable.

By embracing learning as a core value, people can work together without the hang-ups, defenses, and barriers which usually inhibit learning. Under these conditions, people can discover the elegantly simple and vastly complex solutions needed by customers. The dilemma facing people working in organizations is how to reduce the barriers and defenses that inhibit learning.

Learning inhibitors and stimulants -- For some, the desire to contribute, to make a difference, to grow and develop and to leave behind a legacy are what motivates behavior. When personal needs like the ones above can be met by providing superior value to customers, the organization is likely to prosper. The desire to excel and satisfy personal needs in the pursuit of **organizational** objectives makes learning and personal development self-perpetuating. Continual learning and personal development generate the fuel that generate ongoing contribution.

There is another set of motivators, based on a fear of incompetence, that are also very powerful. These are motivators that cause people to avoid failure, to seek safety and security, to be cautious, to stay in control, to look good at all costs, and to avoid **blame**. These behaviors can significantly limit the potential of any organization. Personal learning and development are often stunted as defensiveness blocks the ability to push beyond what is known and comfortable. When behavior is driven more by the desire to avoid failure than do what is right, people become:

- Cautious...
- Unwilling to talk about fears and concerns... ..
- Unwilling to take the advice of others...
- Protective...
- Defensive...
- Unwilling to take risks...

Relationships which develop under those conditions are based more on fear, being defensive and protective than being open and trusting others. A perpetual lack of openness and trust can eventually result in self-destructive behavior as people continue to struggle and do things wrong rather than risk what they perceive as sure humiliation and failure. If people cannot give themselves permission to be open, honest, and show vulnerability, the result is a marriage to the status quo which is difficult, if not impossible, to sever.

Fear of incompetence -- For individuals, the fear of appearing incompetent can lead to personal disappointment and frustration. For groups and organizations the fear of incompetence can be paralyzing and lead to reduced levels of competitiveness and customer satisfaction. For organizations operating in fast paced, rapidly changing and complex business environments the fear of incompetence can be fatal.

The origins of fear are often the result of multiple experiences. Some of these occur outside of the organization. Individuals' family, school and other **organizational** experiences can all contribute to a need to play it safe and avoid disconfirming information. In short, people arrive at an organization's door with history that shapes their behavior on a daily basis. So much so that it probably takes very little to confirm one's personal theories about living and work. In other words, if my behavior to date has served my needs, what incentive is there for changing? I deliberately seek out information that confirms my belief about how one succeeds and is successful.

It's unfortunate that people cannot always see, or perhaps prefer not to see the long term consequences of their short term behavior, but it's often much easier to relieve the present tension than to stay with what is uncomfortable in the pursuit of learning new patterns.

Traditional command and control (bureaucratic systems) reinforce the need for predictability... Command and control environments that demand strict adherence to rules and regulations are unlikely to reward innovative and risk-taking behavior. In fact, jobs are often so fragmented that the explicit message is to do as you are told and let others do the thinking. Cultures that discourage innovation and openness are likely to struggle as they attempt to meet the ever changing and more demanding expectations of their customers and the challenge of competitors.

The cycle of *blame* and control: its impact on learning -- The rate and amount of learning in an organization is at risk when the fear of incompetence motivates behavior. In this type of environment, the popular choice is to play it safe and stay with what is known and comfortable.

This popular choice inevitably leads to negative feedback, personal disappointment and frustration that is projected back onto the organization. Often, anger may be expressed at the organization for not providing new opportunities when in fact the person is really personally frustrated for not having been more assertive and responsible about what he or she wanted. All this leads to an unhealthy dependency on the organization for success and a cycle of repeated disappointment and **blame** that is difficult to break. For people trapped within this cycle it becomes easier to **blame** other people and the organization than to confront personal insecurities and accept how he or she is contributing to his or her own disappointment

Management is not immune from the same insecurities... Avoiding risk has much the same impact on the personal development of managers as it does on non-management personnel. The difference is that a manager's fear can have a broader impact on the entire organization. Very often the insecurities felt by the manager get projected onto people they supervise along with a high need for control. The need for control shows itself in a reluctance to let people fail.

The reluctance to let people fail has more to do with the manager's fear of failing as a supervisor than it does with someone else's ability to be successful.

Organizations dominated by managers with a high need for control experience a phenomenon where people work one level below their designated role:

- Senior management worries about and gets involved in operational tasks...
- Middle management ends up doing the job of the first line supervisor and tries to solve day to day problems. . .
- Supervisors tell first line employees how to do their job and make changes in the production process or service delivery process...
- The first line employee is left with implementing what everyone else thinks makes sense and is often nothing more than a pair of hands. Many first line employees end up adjusting their expectations and learn to check their brains at the door.

An organization can have the best and the brightest talent but unless people feel challenged--feel like they are really making a contribution and have the opportunity for learning--there is a limit to how much development really occurs. Eventually, instead of development, the organization gets apathy, passive aggressive acceptance, resignation, and eventually turnover. People are left with a growing sense that there is very little one can do to make a difference.

The fear of incompetence creates a sense of being stuck as it becomes seemingly impossible for people to exercise their competence and make a difference--with so much fear about making mistakes that very little ever changes. Without sufficient learning, over time the perceived risk grows and the fear becomes greater.

The cycle of fear paradox -- There is a paradox operating here that is probably not recognized by those involved. What people caught in this cycle fear most is not being successful and being seen by others as a failure. In reality, unless people are able to break the cycle of **blame** and control, what they fear most is almost certainly to be realized.

The ability of people to learn and continuously improve may be the only competitive advantage that organizations have left. The fear of incompetence can significantly limit that advantage.

Learning how to break the cycle of **blame** and control may be the most important learning for members of many organizations. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers or prescriptions. It will undoubtedly require a series of strategies aimed at improving communication, building relationships, and increasing personal insight and acceptance.

At the individual level -- Starting at the individual level, people may need to do some personal work to understand how they perpetuate the cycle. This level of insight and understanding is not easily achieved and often requires some form of facilitation. Facilitation in a group setting can occur in a T--group.[*] An alternative at the individual level is personal counseling (counseling affords greater privacy and may make it easier for some individuals to confront personal concerns and insecurities). As with the T--group, personal counseling requires a level of readiness to be successful. Neither approach can be viewed simply as one time events. Both must be seen as a process that requires continual effort to achieve personal insight and understanding.

At the group level -- At the group level, team building can be used to build more open and honest relationships and increase team effectiveness. In most cases, this requires a trained facilitator who understands group formation, group development, group processes, and group dysfunction. The facilitator is typically not part of the group and can be an objective third party.

After a group commits to team building, the process usually includes data gathering and feedback to assess the current state. This can be done by the facilitator or by the group with the facilitator's assistance. The outcome of this facilitated group process is often a clearer picture of why and how the group is dysfunctional and what group development activities are needed for the group to be successful. Oftentimes, the process of data gathering and feedback is often enough to stimulate meaningful and open dialogue, as well as more genuine relationships within the group.

Role negotiation . . . Role negotiation (a structured approach to determining what roles people will play and how they will interact) is a strategy often associated with team building. During such a negotiation, team members actually contract with each other to establish effective working relationships. As contracts are reviewed and continually updated, it becomes a way for people to explore their relationships at a deeper level.

Like the individual level interventions, team building is most effective when it is treated as a process--building relationships takes time and a considerable personal investment.

At the organizational level -- At the **organizational** level, strategies like work redesign often involve a renegotiation of roles, responsibilities, and forms of self--management. The objective of such strategies is to put control where it can best

serve customers and enable people to feel more accountable for the organization's success. It encourages people to be dependent upon themselves and not **blame** others for failures or shortcomings.

The process of becoming self-directed involves an increasing level of personal openness and cooperation. Initiatives aimed at self-direction are designed to change the system and dramatically alter the organization's culture. Encouraging self-direction, may require that the organization examine how it handles failures--the way it responds to risk taking and failure sends a clear message about the kind of culture it wants to create).

How can an organization support a learning environment? **Organizational** practices need to be reviewed to see if and how they perpetuate the fear of incompetence:

- One means of supporting risk taking would be to reward people for attempting a more difficult task even when results fall below expectations. To some this may sound absurd but organizations, or really people, must learn to deal with failure in a way that saves face and does not support the need to **blame** or the belief that one is responsible for the success of others.
- Job posting is another example of a practice that may need adjustment. It is often more difficult for internal candidates to advance than it is for people from outside the organization. Organizations may want to give internal candidates the opportunity to try a job before going outside to fill the position.

Given the impact that leaders have on creating culture, or maintaining inertia in any organization, a change in leadership may be the only alternative. Along with this change should come increased levels of accountability throughout the organization. This will help individuals see their contributions to the problem and its solution.

With all that is written about learning organizations, it is really the people who determine the rate and amount of learning that actually occurs. Breakthroughs at the intra- and interpersonal level have the potential of unlocking the kind of success that leads to customer satisfaction and organization vitality.