Bridging the Gap

Building a Learning Environment in the Workplace

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Abstract
Workplaces don’t typically look like ideal learning environments. That gap reflects a way of thinking that is being replaced with a vision of workplaces designed to be learning organizations. Closing that gap can be a challenge, however, and this paper describes nine elements of learning and explores how and to what extent they appear in most workplaces. The kind of learning described here requires a rethinking of much that we take for granted, including how we conceive of work itself. This white paper is the first in a series dedicated to exploring different ways of thinking about and transforming workplace learning. The next issue will discuss ways to improve learning at work, and subsequent issues will address motivation, creativity, and adult developmental theory and how these concepts can be operationalized and applied to support a learning organization.
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**The Gap**

Think of a time when you were part of a group of people who learned well together. What characteristics describe that environment? What did it feel like to be there? Most who’ve tried this exercise describe a sense of trust and shared discovery—permission to explore, a freedom to make mistakes, yet a commitment to truth seeking. The environments they describe include a mentor offering guidance attuned to the individual while also allowing room for rich and vibrant exchange, resulting in intimate and honest communication. They might be in a laboratory or in the field, at a preschool, in Dad’s woodworking shop, or at the kitchen table with friends and a bottle of wine. The contexts described are comfortable and safe and engaging. They’re places you just want to be.

Now compare your ideal learning environment with your workplace. If you’re like most, the two will seem dissimilar—one space is “warm and cozy” and about learning, and the other is not, or not to the same degree. Between them is a gap. This gap seems logical if the point of the workplace is not to help us learn but, rather, to enable us to produce efficiently and consistently. But the gap is disheartening because it suggests we’re missing out on something rewarding, humane, and wonderful if we’re not encouraging at work the kinds of things that go into rich learning: individuality, experimentation, intimacy, and risk taking.

The notion that the workplace is for working, not for learning, seems to be slowly losing its power, however, as organizations see the value of the “learning mandate.” The argument is that in our global, flat, connected world, everything is change. Every business model is ripe for disruption. The only organizations that will survive are those that can reinvent themselves, not just to adapt to external change but to foresee that change and even provoke it. As part of the learning mandate, organizations need to shift priorities away from efficient production and top-down authority toward innovation, creativity, play, idea cultivation, reflection, and bottom-up planning processes—in short, learning. This is the idea of the *learning organization*—noted by Donald Schon in *Beyond the Stable State* in 1973, developed by Schon and Chris Argyris in *Organizational Learning*, and popularized by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*.

In theory it shouldn’t be hard to weave more opportunities for learning into an organization. Because learning is increasingly understood as a social activity, it should fit well in our workplaces, which are, after all, social. The kind of thinking that would go into the stewardship of a learning ecosystem is akin to the management of other workplace systems, such as managing finances or facilities. And because their business is learning, institutions of higher education would seem in particular to be excellent places to cultivate a culture of learning among their professional staff.

That said, perhaps no organization—in or outside higher education—has comprehensively and consistently realized the goal of being a learning organization. As attractive as the idea might be, achieving it is not easy. Senge suggests this is because learning, from the perspective of traditional conceptions of work, is unmistakably “radical,” relating that after almost two decades of working to foster learning in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Argyris, a seminal figure in organizational learning, felt “it was going to take ‘a long, long, time.’”

For this reason, any effort at improving learning in the workplace should begin with acknowledging the gap between the existing environment and the kind of environment that could answer the challenge of the learning mandate. But seeing the gap might not be that easy, particularly if meaningful workplace learning is as radical an idea as Senge suggests. To help make the challenge clearer, the next section describes nine elements of learning and explores how and to what extent they appear in most workplaces.
Nine Characteristics of Learning

1. Trust
Effective learning starts with acknowledging that there is something you don’t know. Doing this puts you in a state of vulnerability as a learner, and a good learning environment protects you when you’re in this state, by allowing you to make mistakes, experiment, and work your way forward. A typical workplace, however, does not usually provide this kind of safety. Work is often political, and being seen as competent and strong is important to having influence. The first challenge to improving workplace learning is finding ways to embrace and protect vulnerability by introducing new behavioral norms and reinforcing them. One way to approach this would be in a piecemeal fashion, working with small teams that are ready to explore what it would mean to create a space where you could not know something, or by creating limited times when similar norms are in force—“experimentation Fridays,” for example.

2. Feedback
The learning process has a few steps: envision something, try it out, see how it goes, adjust, and try again. Regardless of what is being learned, the process depends heavily on the “seeing how it goes” part, which is feedback. Feedback can come in a variety of forms, but it must be timely, accurate, and unambiguous. It should be bidirectional, too—the feedback giver should be open to feedback on her feedback. Meeting these criteria is not easy, and doing so involves some risk. As a result, valuable and helpful feedback is not as common in the workplace as it might be.

Think about the classic exchange of feedback between a supervisor and an employee, a consistently problematic area in organizational behavior, according to Argyris. This exchange can be highly productive—the interactions between a manager and a staff member could take the form of an ongoing, open, meaningful conversation in regular meetings and informal moments throughout the year in which performance criteria are articulated and mutually accepted and helpful, bidirectional feedback and related support are provided. Instead of an ongoing conversation, workplace feedback unfortunately often happens in infrequent, high-stakes meetings that reinforce the power dynamic between employee and manager. In such situations, feedback is less likely to be timely, helpful, honest, and open.

Several approaches can contribute to developing better feedback in the workplace. Protocols such as the “Ladder of Feedback” provide guidance about giving meaningful feedback. The feedback context can be changed to reduce the disciplinary or confrontational quality that often arises and to create a space for communication that can be less polished and more honest. Teams can aspire to make some feedback an ongoing, group responsibility as a routine part of a collaborative, dynamic, trusting group culture.

3. Talk
Talking is important for learning. In particular, learners need the kind of talk that helps them understand what they know, engage with other learners, explore and establish the meaning of things, and see ideas in different ways. Such talk comes from the individual’s honest and personal perspective, and individuals will talk their way toward a more refined and informed perspective at their own pace by their own trajectory. Multiply that process by the number of learners participating, and you can see that your learning environment will need to allow for frequent moments of beautiful, cacophonous chatter—a diverse, individual, chaotic, self-reflective mixture of wrong and right. It’s a kind of talk that Edgar Schein calls “dialogue,” which aims at uncovering honest truths and removes the stigma of saying the wrong thing, allows the formation of new group norms, and requires a kind of self-awareness unusual in the workplace.
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This kind of talk, though, can threaten some of the things we honor in the workplace—a sense of unanimity and the avoidance of a kind of negative backchannel of water-cooler gossip. Who hasn’t felt the sinking feeling you get when there is deeply felt disagreement about how to approach problems, and the contrary, the positive feeling of being a happy member of a team where everyone has bought into the particular mission? The problem, of course, is that too much emphasis on unanimity and the suppression of counternarratives inhibit people from working through ideas with each other, and then they can’t learn together effectively. The goal is to balance both—to strive for a sense of collective purpose and togetherness, while also giving space for people to explore the meaning of things.

Consider the formation of a strategic plan. In a traditional workplace, the plan might be written by a small subset of the organization—typically the leadership team—and simply announced to the rest of the organization. This makes sense from the point of view of efficiency. Alternatively, the creation of such a key organizational document could be an opportunity to learn together. The process could be designed for all staff to gather, sort, and make visible a variety of options; openly discuss the pros and cons; and collectively decide which ideas are the best. Such an approach would expose participants to a stimulating breadth of possibilities and perspectives, provide opportunities to advocate for ideas and collaborate with people cross-functionally, and encourage participants to rethink their assumptions. This kind of exercise would prioritize learning, and it would allow for the kind of talk learning requires.

4. Intrinsic Motivation

A fourth characteristic of learning is that you learn better if you’re learning something you want to learn. The most productive learning environments are those in which individuals engage in what they consider important, while receiving feedback from trusted others. In contrast, most workplaces are structured around external motivations or expectations enshrined in factors such as quotas, job descriptions, performance criteria, regulations, service-level agreements, and professional norms. This way of organizing work indeed has a beneficial standardizing effect on behavior. But external motivations—whether negative or positive—tend to cause disengagement from the learning context, and they limit the ability for individuals to focus on what they care about, which undermines learning.

Communities of practice provide some insight into how the need to “get things done” can be reconciled with a model of intrinsic motivation. Communities of practice are groups of people who associate because they do similar things—such as share a profession—and, as it turns out, they do a great job of organizational learning. They bring new members up to speed efficiently, develop and maintain community, articulate professional norms, and sustain collective knowledge over very long periods of time. Most interestingly, they are characterized by a horizontal structure that allows for a lot of movement from the periphery, where you’re just learning the nuts and bolts of the profession, to the center, where you’re part of a relatively small group of people who are actively guiding the community’s activities. A routine ebb and flow of people in and out of positions of influence is natural and taken for granted. One characteristic of the community of practice is that you can’t tell it what to do; what it determines to do comes from within its own network of values and relations. Of course, this horizontal, organic, fluid, intrinsically motivated structure is unlike the traditional, hierarchical workplace, but its success can suggest ways we might adapt.

5. Space and Time

When we are focused on learning, we’re careful about the space we learn in and we expect it to take time. In terms of space, think of classrooms, libraries, studios, labs—different kinds of environments, but each carefully designed for a particular kind of learning. In the “atelier” model of learning, for
example, the tools are at hand, the learning is doing, everyone’s work is visible, and the master learner circulates among pupils offering just-in-time feedback. The work context, by contrast, continues to be largely dominated by the more restrictive model of a person sitting at a desk, which necessarily limits how she can interact and learn with her colleagues. As we start to give more thought to the kinds of spaces in which we ask staff to do their jobs, and as we begin to emphasize learning, we will see some key changes. First of all, we will start to provide different kinds of spaces to work, allowing people to move between them as necessary to accommodate the different ways people need to think and interact. Secondly, workplaces will do a better job of using space to make the thinking of the team visible. Group learning hinges on participants knowing what the other members of the group are thinking and doing, and the environment can support this understanding.

In terms of time, when we’re learning, we don’t expect instantaneous change. If it means something, learning can take weeks, a semester, a year, or more. In the workplace, on the other hand, the dominant sense is often one of being reactive, moving from crisis to crisis, sensing unfinished things piling up. At work, we seldom think we have enough time to learn something well. The goal, therefore, is to find ways to weave thinking at a learning time-scale into work processes. An example of how this might work is designing learning outputs that are timed to meet workplace needs. Thriving learners produce copious artifacts of their learning—tests, papers, projects, experiments, presentations, books, blog posts. With some thoughtfulness, we can make those products applicable and useful and timed to fit into the workplace, and doing so would let us meet business needs while accommodating learning time scales.

6. Creativity, Play, and Ideas

One of the challenges in any organization is how to handle novelty—finding it, encouraging it, protecting it, and developing it into something practical. Organizations tend to do routine things well, but the messy process of coming up with new things to do can be intimidating. Yet all learning starts with something novel, at least to the learner, or it wouldn’t be learning. A learning organization, therefore, must find a way to overcome the routine and cultivate and develop new ideas just as a timber company routinely plants seedlings to replace the trees it harvests.

In addition to managing ideas, organizations need to help people have them. Models for finding ideas can be found in places that deal in creativity: advertising agencies, design firms, artists’ procedures, inventors’ labs, and in the recently burgeoning research on creativity. In a dynamic, learning organization, ideas and the various ways they are discovered—including creativity, play, spontaneity, brainstorming, and experimentation—become a strategic investment. A way to begin is to start thinking about your organization’s idea life cycle. Where do ideas come from, and where do they go? Do certain people seem to have more ideas? Are people rewarded for having ideas? Are ideas supported and developed long enough to see whether they have potential? These kinds of questions help organizations institutionalize the “having of wonderful ideas.”

7. Mystery, Faith, and Collaboration

Learning is often a journey without a clear destination, and even if the goal is known, the path usually is not. Learners follow hunches, solve challenges, and let curiosity lead the way, running into stumbling blocks and happy discoveries along the way and adjusting the path as needed. Even in a formal course, with a detailed syllabus and where the pathways are largely charted, each student has an individual starting point and follows a unique learning process. To allow such mysterious and individualized journeys to reveal their purpose at their own time requires an unusual kind of faith—from the learner and the learning environment.
To illustrate this on a collective level, consider the distinction between “cooperation” and “collaboration” as modes of interaction. In cooperation, everyone knows what the end goal is and how their role contributes; the “rules” are known in advance. Relationships are transactional—what I need from you is the piece we agreed you would contribute and no more. In collaboration, individuals don’t know exactly what they will contribute or what the other participants will do. The “rules” are collectively written while the work is going on. Successful collaboration depends on honesty, trust, openness, communication, and feedback, and it happens in periods of crisis or new challenges, when new teams come together, in work outside the team’s comfort zone, in creative work, or in play.

A traditional organization excels at cooperation, at undertaking journeys that have a relatively predictable outcome. A learning organization is one that is also comfortable with collaboration and that has found ways to allow for the mystery and faith that promote meaningful learning. For those of us wanting to improve learning in our organizations, the challenge is to find spaces or times or ways that enable us to undertake things without clear outcomes, or to partner without clear rules of engagement. In part, this requires the context to be made explicit—letting everyone know that in these moments of mystery and faith we’re intentionally diverging from the normal way we work together and that it is okay, or even necessary, that we do.

8. Mindfulness and Reflection

Mindfulness and reflection describe a shift in attention away from the events, plans, and projects of the external and present world, focusing instead on the self, the mind, emotions, behaviors, feelings, and the past. Mindfulness and reflection are important to learning. From one perspective, learning something meaningful is largely learning about yourself and your assumptions about the world—a kind of internal feedback. The relaxed yet aware mood that accompanies mindfulness contributes to the attitude of openness that allows you to see things for the first time, develop novelty, make connections, explore new paths—all things that go hand-in-hand with learning.

The typical workplace, of course, prioritizes a focus on the external, on events, on projects, on consequences, and on the future. The experience of time in the workplace and the urgency for getting things produced don’t allow much time for meditative, reflective, mindful activities. For the learning organization, the challenge is again one of balance, of encouraging and supporting staff in mindful and reflective activities, which help create an environment where learning is more effective, without allowing too much disruption to the routine tasks that need to be done.

9. Teachers

Schein notes that if you want a learning culture, one of the things you need are people who are dedicated to the development of that culture—people whose job it is to know what learning is, know where it is happening, encourage it where it isn’t, and document it when it is. They attend to all the activities that are described and implied in the sections above, including:

- Finding mentors and organize them
- Noticing that a particular group generates lots of creative solutions and ask why
- Developing a sense of what every individual staff member desires to learn
- Knowing where ideas come from and where they go
- Creating safe places to talk
- Advocating for better learning spaces
- Encouraging mystery and ambiguity
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- Finding ways to improve feedback
- Helping make thoughts “visible” to the group

Perhaps the two most important tasks for these individuals are to bring the organization’s attention to things it does that undermine learning and to help people understand the true investment that meaningful learning requires. The general understanding that professional development and skills-based training are necessary is just the first step toward a learning organization, one committed to the intense investment that meaningful organizational learning requires. To achieve this higher level will require individuals—whom we might call “teachers”—dedicated to the stewardship of collective learning as a regular and ongoing activity.

Conclusion

The learning characteristics discussed above are intended to help you think about what an increased investment in learning might look and feel like in your organization—that is, what it would mean to reduce the gap between the typical workplace of today and one that would stand as an adaptive, dynamic learning organization.

To be sure, learning already occurs in the workplace. In any organization, individuals and teams engage in some degree of learning, and the average organization grows and adapts, if only in response to external changes. To have an existing organization of any kind assumes a certain amount of learning and adaptation. Most organizations have a long way to go, however, before meaningful and adaptive learning happens routinely and systematically on both an individual and a group level—before learning is treated as a strategic necessity.

That said, workplaces have some built-in advantages that are worth noting:

- Work often involves stress, and a little bit of stress, interestingly, aids learning.17
- Personalities and how they interact are understood to be crucial for workplace success. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, for example, is effectively a behavioral lingua franca; this sensitivity to affect and interaction is the basis for a culture where talk, feedback, and trust can flourish.
- We’re together. Group and organizational learning takes time. It requires people to be with one another, and at work, as opposed, say, to the traditional college classroom, we are together for extended periods of time.

The kind of radical learning sought here is not likely to occur in most organizations on its own; it instead requires us to be aware of and rethink much that we take for granted, including how we conceive of work itself. Improving learning will also take effort and time, but the return on the investment will be new kinds of organizations better poised to improve, adapt, or innovate—all activities that require learning on an individual and organizational level. This kind of learning culture should be as much a goal for institutions of higher education as for any other organization, particularly as we struggle to redefine education in the digital age.

This white paper is the first in a series dedicated to exploring different ways of thinking about and transforming workplace learning. The next issue will discuss in more detail some ways to improve learning at work, and subsequent issues will address motivation, creativity, and adult developmental theory and how these concepts can be operationalized and applied to support a learning organization.
Notes


4. Peter Senge said, “There is no such thing as a ‘learning organization,’” by which I believe he meant that the idea is to be seen primarily as an aspiration or orientation or destination. See Fred Kofman and Peter M. Senge, “Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations,” *Organizational Dynamics* 22, no. 2 (1993): 4–23.

5. Senge, “Taking Personal Change Seriously.”


17. Gad Yair describes the importance to key learning experiences of a feeling of insecurity and “high risk” in Gad Yair, “Key Educational Experiences and Self-discovery in Higher Education,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24, no. 1 (January 2008): 92–103.