Bridging the Gap, Part 2

Techniques for Supporting Learning in the Workplace

David Wedaman, Brandeis University

ELI Paper 4: 2014
December 2014

Abstract

Our organizations are not as good as they should be at supporting individual and team learning, but we can improve with some relatively simple steps. Those steps include learning new ways to have fruitful, safe conversations; mining areas of conflict and tension for all they can teach us; designing learning processes into work activities; and supporting individuals as they grow and develop. These changes will make our workplaces more the kinds of places where people can dig into difficult, self-reflective learning. If we’re successful, the work of work will shift from avoiding and coping silently with anxiety, tensions, and quotidian problems and become more about more about drilling into these areas. In this way, we can move past the constriction of a fixed organization and create places where individuals can be together in creative, loving, whole, and flexible new ways.
Part one of this article described the gap between the culture that generally exists in the workplace today and the kind of learning culture required by a dynamic, adaptive organization. Part 2 proposes five actions that anyone might consider who wants to bridge that gap and speaks to the particular perspective of organizational learning in higher education.

1. Patch the Operating System

A learning organization is one that can adapt, which means people in it can change their individual and collective behaviors. Changing behaviors in meaningful ways is difficult, however, because much of how we act is hard-wired, controlled by individual and group belief systems that exist on a subconscious level. These beliefs form as a normal part of life: they develop as we try to make sense of the things that happen to and around us. Group belief systems develop when a new group forms and works together, and the values of the group are communicated to new members, sometimes in subtle ways—nuances of body language and tone and feeling. These beliefs are unwritten team rules that describe what is allowed, what's expected of members, what's permissible to talk about, who has status, how transgressions are punished, and so forth. Using an analogy from the world of technology, you could see them as a kind of hidden operating system.

We follow these rules because of our concerns about what would happen if we didn’t—being vulnerable, losing face or status, and being excluded from the group. These concerns usually prevent people from challenging the rules, reflecting on them, discussing them, or even really thinking about them. As a result, one of the most important rules is not to talk about the rules. In Chris Argyris’s famous formulation, we cover up the things we're really thinking, and we cover up the fact that we cover up.

Discussing the rules tends to make people uncomfortable, as if they were in trouble. But if we can’t talk about the rules, then the organization can’t “see”—much less change—those rules, and if we can’t change the rules, we can’t change our behavior. As a result, we won’t learn or grow meaningfully as individuals and as teams. The goal is to empower people to do what they are hard-wired not to do, which is talk about what they do and why they do it.

To continue our technology metaphor, to enable change, your team will need to stop the operating system momentarily to install a patch or rewrite a line or two of code. There are a variety of ways to go about framing this kind of a rules conversation, but all require certain conditions, including a safe place to talk, a way to let people know what they are getting into and why, an agreement from participants to do the work, and some guidelines for how the conversation should be conducted. If you can show that current behaviors impede the growth of the group, then there is a downside to the status quo that can offset the cost of the emotional work involved in upsetting that status. It is also important that the group be ready to see its behavior as part of the problem. It’s helpful, in other words, to use a problem and a related sense of accountability as ways in to the conversation. After a few successful attempts, though, you might not need a problem to prompt the process. You might find that people will begin to seek out these kinds of conversations when they get a sense of how powerful, transformative, and helpful patching the operating system can be.

To get started, you might use statements such as the following with a group interested in framing its own rules conversation: “We’re going to make a space where we can talk to each other in ways we normally don’t. We’re going to be open and transparent about how we act (and why we act that way). We think our behaviors might need to change if we want to get better as a group. Having this conversation is how we will begin to get better.”
2. Add Loops

Think of learning as a circular process. It involves doing something in a provisional way, seeing what happens, and making adjustments. If you don’t adjust an iterated action, then you’re repeating, not learning. However, many workplace activities are linear in conception. We see a problem, take an action, and move on to other, unassociated topics. As a result, what we might learn from one sequence doesn’t always inform another. A lot of good and common workplace activities—measuring outcomes, capturing lessons learned, conducting postaction assessments, mapping processes, even writing policies (if those policies are conceived of as dynamic and adjustable)—counter this linear-thinking tendency, but where it remains, it threatens to undermine learning.

As a simple exercise, sketch out an activity as a basic process map, a series of steps, or a flowchart, and consider how you can create workflow loops in which data about the activity are collected and fed back into subsequent iterations or related activities. Consider a customer service exchange at a service desk: Client asks for a thing; client is (or isn’t) given the thing. In such a model, learning “escapes” the open ends of the process. Anything you learn from the encounter disappears before the next occurrence.

All we need to do to start “looping” this linear process is to add a step in which we ask the client or the staff member how the interaction went and then feed the data from that question back into the process. Even if the result simply lets your staff member know he or she answered a certain question well, that’s learning. When you try this exercise, don’t stop at the first loop you find, but push yourself to look for other places and ways to loop. Create loops that go further back in the process. Maybe something you learn from the service-desk transaction, for instance, can help you better prepare clients before they come to the service point. What about looping from this service iteration to other service iterations? Maybe what you learn from this service point can be shared with other service points. Now you’ve got a sideways loop. And so on.

Where it gets particularly interesting is when the data change the process design. Maybe you learn something from the transaction that lets you eliminate the need for the transaction. Maybe you stop the problem from happening, or give clients the ability to fix it themselves. Here you’re taking a meta-position on process or your context. You’re starting to see how your organization works as a kind of ecosystem. You’re thinking increasingly systematically, and systems thinking, per Peter Senge, is the hallmark of a learning organization.

You can take any activity and examine it for loop potential, and you can always find ways to add loops. As you see from the examples here, loops are often not difficult to come up with. In fact, you probably already do this in your organization from time to time. The point is to see if you can make looping a habit. The meta exercise of adding loops is so important that we could probably justify a senior position dedicated to it (a “chief looping officer”).

As important as it is to create loops, you should expect some resistance because the rules are at play. The rules tell us not to openly say bad things about other people or let them say bad things about us. A learning loop might dredge up something “bad” (here “bad” is in quotes because a learning organization wouldn’t think any data that lead to improvement could be bad). Consequently, you may discover that you need to surface and adjust your rules before you can really loop; but a looping process can also be an effective way into a rules conversation.
3. Share Thoughts

Though we might not be aware of it, we think in relatively involved argument structures, or chains of reasoning. Stephen Toulmin’s argumentation model helps explain this in a clear way. You can categorize a given strand of thinking into three main parts: the “ground,” factual information we collect or perceive; the “claim,” or our judgment or interpretation of those data; and a middle step, called the “warrant,” which is the reasoning, or the logical process, by which we came to form our claim. To really learn well as a group, we need to make all three parts of the Toulmin model transparent and open for collective consideration and adjustment. If I’m trying to think through a past situation or incident, for example, I need to say, “Here’s what I think happened, here’s why I think it happened, and here’s how I came to that conclusion.” I need to be open to your giving me additional data or challenging some of my data; to your having a different interpretation of those data; and to your challenging me to reconsider my reasoning.

If this openness sounds strange, it’s because we don’t generally do this. We don’t share our data or our reasoning. We do share claims, however, and the reason is buried in the rules—we’re vulnerable if we open up our data and reasoning. If we are patient and open about what we saw and how we came to our conclusion, people around us will have input into our thinking and our proposed action, and they might make conclusions that aren’t the same as ours. They may decide that we made a bad conclusion, which would be embarrassing. They might influence the action to go in a different direction, which could undermine our goals. You risk less if you make an assertion quickly, forgoing the data and the reasoning. It’s less penetrable, and you have a chance of having it be accepted before anyone catches on. At least this is the gambit the rules would have us take. An even more self-protective and common gambit is to not even actually make an assertion, but to only allude to it.

Part of the problem is that we’re not generally conscious of how we think. When you look at a painting and form an opinion of it, you don’t typically ask yourself a series of questions designed to elicit your thought, such as “What exactly am I seeing here? What do I think about that? What is my interpretation? How do I get to that interpretation from the paint on the canvas? Is that a reasonable interpretation? Are my feelings involved here, too? What are they?” Instead, you probably just announce whether you like it. And so it goes for many other thinking moments in work (and in popular culture).

Perhaps there is also a natural resistance to the effort of slowing down our leaps of thought to understand, share, and improve them—a law of conservation of mental energy. Thinking about your own thought does require some practice and skill. But, of course, if you want a team of people to think together, they will need to be able to know and talk about their own thoughts in cogent ways, as well as be able to hear and understand other people doing the same thing. If we have the patience to work at it—and there are tools and tricks that can help us—we come closer to Ron Ritchhart’s “culture of thinking,” to being a network of linked thinking nodes capable of processing more information and making decisions of a higher quality than can individuals alone.
4. Unpack Moments of Tension

One of the most notable characteristics of working with other people is that we annoy and confuse one another. Any workplace—even a healthy and functional one—is filled with countless moments of tension, misunderstanding, or hurt feelings ranging from inadvertent oversights to calculated insults. We annoy and confuse each other so much and in such a variety of intentional and unintentional ways that you might say the primary work of “work” is just dealing with the repeated affronts, insults, misunderstandings, inexplicable behaviors, and our own related feelings.

Some of these points of tension are serious enough that we think about them consciously and sometimes, albeit rarely, act to resolve them. In general, though, we tend to avoid really thinking about and addressing these incidents in any meaningful way, and it’s because of the rules. When I say we don’t address them, I don’t mean we don’t talk about them. We do talk about them—we just don’t talk about them with the relevant people—those with whom we are in tension. We are afraid of what will happen if we engage meaningfully—we might open the Pandora’s box of a scary or interminable conflict; we might damage feelings beyond the point of repair or be hurt ourselves; people might laugh at us; we might open ourselves up to a lawsuit; we might be labeled troublemakers; and so on.

We avoid addressing points of tension because they make us uncomfortable, and our avoidance only serves to increase the anxiety about them. But there are other ways to deal with the issues, tensions, and misunderstandings of the workplace. First, treat these moments of tension as innocuous and routine, and give yourself permission to deal with them as such—calmly, without fear, as a commonplace work activity that requires skills that will develop with practice and support.

Second, you can see moments of tension as a wonderful and valuable commodity, an opportunity to perceive the rules at play. In this way, the myriad problems aren’t like organizational flaws or wounds or unexploded bombs but more like windows into the interior, little dioramas or microcosms of interpersonal relations that you can unpack, examine, look at from various angles, and learn from. They are entry points to having a conversation about the rules, giving multidirectional feedback, creating learning loops, and understanding and appreciating the complexity of motivations, desires, hopes, and challenges of people working together. Learning to use moments of tension in this second way, as conflicts that “solve you” (rather than you them), is part of being a learning organization.

5. Develop People

The first four suggestions shared here have a group focus; this one focuses on individuals and their development. One of the things that gets lost when we focus on the operations and outcomes of the organization is the development of individuals. Part of the problem is that we tend to think of people as fixed, as machine parts that either work or need to be replaced. The common leadership call to “get the right people on the bus” makes this assumption—you’re either right or you’re not. How you get to be right in the first place is not something the bus worries about.

Another common assumption also shows that we think of ourselves as “fixed.” This is the idea that you must leave your organization any time things get difficult—you get a bad review, your team isn’t performing, someone who reports to you becomes your boss, a colleague gets a bigger raise, and so forth. A related idea is that you need to leave if you want to substantively improve. If you leave when things get difficult or if you feel constrained, you’re actually missing an opportunity to learn deeply together—that’s a point of tension that can be unpacked.
Perhaps because we see ourselves as fixed, most of the professional development offered in work is technical or skills based. It is designed to add knowledge to the fixed container of the person rather than grow the person. As many have said, however, the challenges we face often require adaptive improvements. More information won’t make us better; instead, we need to change the way we see the world, growing the person, not the person’s information content.\textsuperscript{11}

The need for adaptive improvements can present itself in a misleadingly simple way. It can appear as minor, personal, or “touchy-feely” on the surface, but it can represent a broad and substantive growth edge that cuts across our work and life, tying into our past experiences and bound up in an internal rule system much like the system that governs group behavior. Common adaptive improvements include delegating more, advocating for yourself, being more proactive, being more organized, being more open or trusting, listening better, taking more risks, and so on. Consider the act of delegating, for example. If I’m not delegating well, it might be a simple “technical” problem (I didn’t realize I could trust my reports to manage their work), or it might be more complicated (I have a personal rule system that tells me if I don’t do everything myself I’ll fail). If it’s the second problem, just telling me to delegate more won’t change my behavior; I have to rewrite my personal belief system.

In any event, the workplace doesn’t do well by these kinds of difficult, complicated, multidomain, deeply personal challenges. We see them as something that can’t be addressed, as just part of someone’s personality, or as “soft” things people might work on with a therapist outside work. Yet they have major implications for our organizations. If we could find a way to help each other work on our growth edges, we would be better employees, and our organization would perform better as a result. In a sense, we would be helping the people on the bus grow to be the right people, regardless of how they got there. The bus ride would then be not just about going somewhere different but about becoming something different at the same time.

A new movement in the business world seeks to create workplaces that provide a culture in which people can help each other grow meaningfully. They’re called DDOs, or deliberately developmental organizations, and they are designed with the idea that you can use the workplace as a wonderfully instructive medium in which people can observe themselves and their limitations and try out new behaviors.\textsuperscript{12} Although DDOs are currently rare (three have been confirmed), they are very successful as organizations and show that it’s possible for work to be a place not only where people work but also where they are supported in their improvement. Mentorship programs and counseling can also make work more developmental, and in the age of the MOOC, such programs can be made available to an entire organization.\textsuperscript{13} The first step for someone wanting to create their own DDO? Find partners—people within the organization who are willing to work collectively on their own growth edges and create a space where it is permissible to talk about those growth edges.

**Learning in Higher Education Workplaces**

Higher education workplaces have a double identity. They are learning organizations wrapped inside traditional organizations. The student-facing parts—the classroom, the lab, faculty advising, student support services, campus life—actively seek to develop and support learning and thinking cultures. They are open to things like looping, unpacking tensions, and thinking together, as well as to the idea of growing the container in addition to the content—activities that are part of sound learning theory and practice. For example, allowing a student to surface and rewrite basic assumptions is the hallmark of a great course. But the layer of the higher education organization that exists around those student-facing parts, inhabited primarily by faculty and staff, is not necessarily learning oriented. Organizational culture in this outer layer is governed as much by hidden rules, fear of vulnerability, and avoidance of tension as is any workplace outside higher education. For those of us with a foot in
Supporting Learning in the Workplace

both contexts, it can be especially frustrating to see, on the one hand, the delight with which a well-supported student engages the world and, on the other, the ways in which the average staff member struggles, given the relative lack of scaffolding around his or her learning.

Yet this dual identity can be an advantage. Many workplaces must approach organizational learning from scratch, with no in-house examples to build on. But an institution of higher education can simply transfer its knowledge of supporting student learning to the administrative parts of the organization, drawing on existing experience and the best practices and models immediately available on its campus. This challenge—of transfer rather than of creation ex nihilo—can be framed in multiple ways:

- To create spaces and contexts in the administrative parts of the organization that feel like good classrooms or seminars, where participants are safe to have “rules conversations”
- To offer staff and faculty themselves the kind of supportive mentoring a faculty member gives to students
- To explore worker-centered development with as much will as we do student-centered learning
- To challenge the “lecture” in the work context as we do in the classroom
- To give work teams the sense of shared learning that students have in a seminar experience
- To document and assess learning in the administrative functions as we so carefully do for student learning
- To expand the purview of the teaching and learning center to encompass organizational learning

Conclusion

Are our organizations as good as they should be at supporting individual and team learning? No, but we can improve with some relatively simple first steps, though they will take us out of our comfort zone. We will need to engage in behaviors such as the ones listed above, behaviors that are not what we normally expect to do at work. To better support learning, we will need to be willing for work to “feel” substantially different. We’ll need to give more attention to the ways we interact with each other. We’ll have to learn new ways to have fruitful, safe conversations on a variety of topics that now tend to be off limits, topics that uncover our rules as a group and that open up our own vulnerabilities as individuals. We’ll need to be better able to mine areas of conflict and tension for all they can teach us. We’ll need to systematically design learning processes (or loops) into work activities. We’ll need to better support individuals as they grow and develop, in ways that perhaps we previously didn’t consider to be work related. We’ll need to rethink many of our basic assumptions about how work works and be prepared to throw some of our most tried-and-true beliefs off the bus.

All this will feel uncomfortable and weird on the one hand but cathartic, redemptive, and healing on the other. It will make our workplaces more the kinds of places where people can dig into the difficult, self-reflective learning done in close-knit communities, in support groups, in restorative justice structures, in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, in therapy, or in spiritual settings. As a result, the transparency, openness, and honesty these kinds of groups require and engender will release at work all sorts of productive energy, happiness, and healing that are currently inaccessible, bound up in self-protective workplace rules. If we’re successful, the work of work will shift from avoiding and coping silently with anxiety, tensions, and quotidian problems toward drilling into these scary areas. In this way, we can move past the constriction of a fixed organization and create places where individuals can be together in creative, loving, whole, and flexible new ways. Our organizations will be more successful and enduring because of it.
Notes

1. This article is an expansion of the December 9, 2013, EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative online seminar “Learning Better as a Team: Why, How, and What For?”


3. “To avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable or incompetent,” in Argyris, “Teaching Smart People,” 103.


6. Kegan and Lahey make this point in the preface to Immunity to Change.


9. For more information, see Ron Ritchhart’s Cultures of Thinking website.

10. As stated by colleague who is a teacher, “If you’re complaining, you’re talking to the wrong person.”


13. The edX MOOC Unlocking the Immunity to Change: A New Approach to Personal Improvement, taught in spring 2014, is a good example. Tens of thousands of people worldwide, including workplace teams, registered for this open course designed to support adaptive growth.