

Leading a Learning Organization - How Do You Influence Success?*

Bill McCollum, Ed.D. and Mr. Jim. Thomas

Does the US Army develop leaders that positively influence learning in their organizations, or leaders that detract from success? The answer is probably yes to both counts. Contemporary organizational and leadership literature suggest creating learning environments is critical to improving organizations over the long-term. So the challenge at hand is how to tip the scales towards developing leaders that can foster the climate in their organizations that promotes learning. Although current leadership doctrine labels the US Army as a learning organization, some state rather emphatically the US Army, or militaries in general, are not learning organizations and because of their bureaucratic histories may never achieve a “learning organization” status (Gerras, 2002; Kiszely, 2007). At a holistic level, they may be right. However, the Army can produce learning organizations, but only if its leaders understand the long-term commitments associated with a learning organization, and understand the implications of their individual personalities, leadership styles, and beliefs of control to develop, foster, and maintain a learning organization.

Numerous sources exist that describe learning organizations. Perhaps Peter Senge provides the most concise and relevant to this discussion. In his seminal book *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge describes a learning organization as “...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” (Senge, 1990: 3) In a contemporary US Army setting, Gerras (2002) describes a learning organization as “...one in which organizational thought, whether routine planning or high-level decision making, is conducted by teams of leaders that facilitate a dialogue that values reflective thought, new patterns of thinking and a suspension of assumptions.” Given these descriptions, most Army leaders are quick to realize the value of such an organization. Phrases such as “create the results they truly desire”, “continually learning how to learn together”, and “new patterns of thinking” are intoxicating to most military leaders. These phrases are complementary with the goals of senior defense civilian and military leaders. In the contemporary operating environment where we face a long and continued struggle to overcome a very adaptive foe, our senior leaders search for ways to improve our forces.

In a 2005 Brookings Institute Policy Brief, Paul C. Light (July, 2005) writes of Donald Rumsfeld’s efforts to transform the department. In the brief, Light writes, “Rumsfeld has focused on four specific attributes, or pillars, of organizational robustness: (1) alertness to the futures ahead, (2) agility to how the department responds to threats and opportunities, (3) adaptability in what the department actually does, and (4) alignment around a clear mission.” Although the former Secretary received great criticism for some of his methods to transform the Department of Defense, few argued the change motive behind the initiative. When focusing on the benefits of the former Secretary’s intent, one can easily see how the learning organization descriptives of Senge and Gerras are imperative to the achievement of Rumsfeld’s transformation pillars.

However, to achieve long lasting change of this scope, leaders must embrace a commitment to learning for not just themselves, but also their organizations. The Army has made significant strides in establishing a philosophy to further individual development through the institutional, experiential, and personal development constructs. For years this philosophy has influenced individual development from the early stages of one’s career to retirement. However, the Army can realize additional benefits by further developing a philosophy of long-term learning for organizations. Senge recognizes the linkage of individual and organizational development in his statement, “Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it, no organizational learning occurs.” (Senge, 1990) This comment leads one to the thought that if individual learning can influence organizational learning, then an effective

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organizational learning environment can also influence individual learning. The two are inextricably intertwined. This intertwining can result in a learning organizational climate, but only if leaders view it as a long-term commitment. Only then will leaders establish a climate that will endure long after their departure and further becomes part of a broader learning culture across the force.

Another challenge to consider in developing learning organizations is the requirement for talented and experienced participants leaders at all levels (Fullan, 2001). This can cause anxieties in the Army because although leaders have control over their own dedication and motivation to learn, they often believe they have little control over the talent and experience levels existing within the organization, at least initially. Further, relatively short command tours along with the normal turbulence created by the departures of key officer and NCO leaders exacerbate a short-term focus. These are valid considerations, however if the Army can institutionalize learning in organizations, leaders at all levels will arrive at units with an expectation of perpetuating an organizational learning culture, regardless of their tour length. This expectation can then help perpetuate a long-term view of organizational learning. A question often asked is, how can leaders personally influence learning in their organizations?

Clearly, leaders who desire to be the role model for learning must first invest in formal education and experiential learning of themselves. However, that is not enough. Senior and organizational-level leaders must attain an awareness of how they personally influence learning organizations. They must take an introspective look, and achieve an awareness of how they personally lead and influence others, especially as related to fostering learning processes. Specifically, they must know how their individual personalities, their application of power, and beliefs of control affect learning within their organizations.

A leader's personality is often overlooked as affecting the potential for learning within an organization. Surely, numerous variables make up a leader's personality and the intent of this discussion is not to address them all. However, personality behaviors, specifically the Type-A behavior pattern and emotional intelligence have significant influences on an organization-level leader's ability to build and maintain a learning climate. Of the two, Type-A behavior may be the most recognized.

Cardiologists Milton Friedman and Ray Rosenman in conducting research to determine the physical affects of Type-A behavior defined it as an "action-emotion complex that can be observed in any person who is aggressively involved in a chronic, incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time, and if required to do so, against the opposing efforts of other things or other persons." (Quick et al, 1997, 49) Although the term Type-A itself may arouse negative thoughts, some of its characteristics are positive and may be helpful to both the leader and their organizations.

Some descriptors of Type-A behavior such as hard-driving, aggressive, competitive, job-involved, and time-oriented can be considered positive and much-desired comments on performance evaluations. These leader behaviors often result in consistent mission accomplishment in high performing organizations. Organizations thrive on success, and research suggests that success enhances organizational morale. (Quick et al, 1997) If Type-A behavior characteristics were restricted to these descriptions, there would be little cause for concern. Unfortunately, they are not. (Rosch, 2006)

Research also suggests Type-A leaders display behaviors such as anger and hostility. These characteristics are easily viewed as destructive to individuals and organizations, as they are counter to promoting a willingness to learn. Paradoxically, some of the very characteristics and behaviors that may make leaders and ultimately organizations successful are also the ones that can make them unsuccessful in developing learning organizations. Type-A leaders who know themselves and adjust behaviors through self-awareness, understanding, discipline, patience, and practice (Quick et al, 1997) can excel in fostering a learning organization climate. This awareness leads to emotional intelligence.

A leader's emotional intelligence will influence his or her ability to develop a learning organization. Daniel Goleman (2000) describes emotional intelligence as a cluster of personal and social competencies that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skill. These competencies assist leaders in understanding their personal ability to establish and maintain individual and organizational relationships at all levels essential for an effective learning environment. Moreover, leaders who apply an understanding of the importance of relationships are more apt to foster a positive knowledge-building climate within their organization (Fullan, 2001). This understanding of leader personality and emotional intelligence can significantly influence the learning climate within organizations. Other aspects of the effective leader's self-awareness that have bearing on a positive learning environment include the leader's style and their beliefs relating to power.

Goleman (2000) cites research that suggests six leadership styles; coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter and coaching. Although some leaders view their leadership style as fixed and inflexible, Goleman suggests successful leaders have the ability to apply multiple styles commensurate with varying situations and circumstances along with applying the climate influencing variables of flexibility, responsibility, standards, clarity, and commitment. And while six styles may exist, four have consistently positive results on an organization's climate. The other two, coercive and pacesetter styles create potential hazards for leaders, especially as related to the learning organization.

Most can relate to the descriptions of the problematic styles. Coercive leaders are usually autocratic and controlling, and take a highly directive approach to leadership. They normally follow a very strict code of rules and procedures, and expect others to conform to their wishes. They establish missions and constantly pressure their subordinates to work longer and harder to achieve them. They believe any actions or activities that detract from the immediate tasks at hand are harmful. One can easily see how the climate established by coercive leaders would negatively influence a learning climate.

Pacesetter leaders may not be as corrosive as the coercive leader, but still possess traits that can degrade the potential of a learning organization. While the Goleman-provided pacesetter characteristics such as setting and enforcing high standards, doing things better and faster, and insisting upon excellence from everyone around them may be considered positive, they can also have negative learning consequences. He states, "...the pacesetter style destroys climate. Many employees feel overwhelmed by the pacesetter's demands for excellence, and their morale drops." (Goleman, 2000: 86) Other research indicates that leadership styles with tight control may be counter-productive. Fullan (2002) suggests control freaks inhibit the sharing of knowledge essential for learning, while enablers foster an environment conducive to knowledge sharing and learning.

While Goleman (2000) cites research that suggests authoritative, affiliative, democratic and coaching (in order) as the most successfully applied styles, as stated earlier leaders with the flexibility to apply multiple styles are more apt to achieve success. It is not a stretch to connect these thoughts to the styles more apt to develop and foster a learning organization. But even so, a leader's beliefs and application of power will also influence an organization in its quest to become a learning organization.

In a seminal study in the late 1950's, John French and Bertram Raven (1962) identified five sources of social power which over the years have been juxtaposed to leader power in organizations; reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. Briefly, legitimate refers to the power bestowed upon leaders by formal, or legitimate, positions within organizations. Referent power is exercised through association with others who possess power, and expert refers to one's knowledge, talents, and skills and their resulting ability to influence others. Reward power flows from the perceived ability to provide incentives or rewards to those within the organization. The opposite of reward is coercive power, the perceived power to punish. It is the source of power with the greatest potential to be the most corrosive in terms of learning.

Coercive power can include threats and the creation of harm or fear among followers. In some situations coercive power could be appropriate, but should be used sparingly and the choice of last resort. It stands to reason if leaders are unaware of coercion's debilitating effects and opt routinely to employ it, then learning within the organization will suffer. Leaders must understand the sources of power available to them, which sources they are the most apt to employ and when, and the results they can expect. This finally leads to control.

A leader's beliefs of control and the manner of control is exercised are topics that will significantly affect organizational learning. Simply stated, too much control will retard the willingness to share needed information among organizational members, and not enough control can result in a lack of focus for learning. Questions leaders should ask include: is the control I exercise real or perceived in my organization, how much control is enough, and am I willing to release control to foster learning?

Clearly leaders have the authority, as well as a responsibility, to exercise control in their organizations. Control is essential for ensuring the accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives. However, control can be either real or perceived, and the perception of over-control can be as harmful as the reality. If organizational members perceive that excessive control over their activities and functions exists, those thoughts are as damaging to them in terms of a willingness to share information and learn as if the control mechanisms actually exist. The point of consideration is often not the systems of control, but rather the manner in which they are believed to be exercised.

Understandably, leaders should establish controls to ensure the right events will occur at the right time, by the right people, with the right resources, for the right reasons, and to accomplish the right results. Control systems rightfully exist to assist in this process. However, when it affects a willingness to share knowledge, and more importantly foster an environment of knowledge sharing, leaders must consider how much personal control is necessary to ensure the mission is accomplished whether they are present or not, and their tendencies as related to control. As mentioned earlier, control-oriented leaders tend to reduce member participation in the learning process. (Fullan, 2001) This reduced participation often results in members believing they have little or no influence over outcomes and achieve little or no satisfaction from their activities. Consequently they, and the organization, have little motivation to improve their performance and knowledge for the long term.

Conversely organizational members are more apt to feel motivated to learn and share experiences when leaders encourage member participation in learning processes. Participative environments allow members to become more vested in organizational outcomes, and thus achieve greater satisfaction because of their contribution to the learning process. Perhaps more importantly, when members are vested in learning and outcomes, the physical presence of leaders becomes less important to mission accomplishment.

All leaders should consider this final thought. They, by definition, carry the responsibility for leading their organizations to accomplish missions, goals and objectives by providing purpose, direction, and motivation. The U.S. Army charges its leaders to also to improve their organizations. One necessity for improving their organizations is the establishment of an environment vested in learning and capable of success long after their departure. Moreover, all leaders must understand their important role in contributing to building a culture of learning organizations.

Introspectively, do you lead for the long-term? What kind of leader are you, and how do your personality, leadership style, and beliefs of control affect your organization? Your answers to these questions may be insightful. Moreover your answers may provide an insight to your organization's potential to attain and sustain the title of "learning organization."

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