

Introduction to Team Learning

A team can be defined as a small group of people, who bring to the table a set of complementary and appropriate skills, and who hold themselves mutually accountable for achieving a clear and identifiable set of goals.

Team learning takes traditional team performance objectives to a new level.

Team learning assumes:

- Every team member comes to the table with something to learn and something to teach.
- Members cannot know in advance precisely what they will learn or teach
- Team goals encompass both performance and learning expectations
- Every member's participation is essential to the team's success
- Members' roles are fluid
- Authority and decision making is shared
- All relevant information is openly shared with the team

Key Characteristics of Learning Teams

- Clear (and shared) sense of purpose
- Good communication – open sharing of all pertinent information
- Shared leadership
- Recognition and utilization of strengths within the team
- Understanding of interdependence of team members
- Mutual encouragement to take risks
- Adaptive – able and willing to change/modify plans when new information/circumstances emerge
- Pride in team identity

Communication in a Learning Organization

Ref: Margaret Wheatley: Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World, Second Edition; San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999; Chapter 6, pp. 93-113

“For a system to remain alive, for the universe to keep growing, information must be continually generated. If there is nothing new, or if the information merely confirms what already is, then the result will be death. Closed systems wind down and decay, victims of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The source of life is new information – novelty – ordered into new structures. We need to have information coursing through our systems, disturbing the peace, imbuing everything it touches with the possibility of new life. We need therefore to develop new approaches to information – not management but encouragement, not control but genesis”

(P. 96)

The new sciences have taught us that information is not and never has been a static “thing”.

- Information is dynamic, ever changing
- Information is the one absolutely ingredient for successful adaptation within a continuously changing environment
- A key requirement of a learning organization is the ability to access or create new information and to ensure that it is freely shared
- New order emerges within self directed (adaptive) groups with adequate access to new information.
- In a team setting, we experience a “jelling” of the group. There is a sense of common direction, a flow to the activity, an experience of increased capacity that far exceeds what we could have accomplished individually.

“Order is never imposed from the top down or from the outside in. Order emerges as elements of the system work together, discovering each other and together inventing new capacities” (P.111)

Understanding Complex Adaptive Systems

Ref: Edwin E. Olson and Glenda H. Eoyang: Facilitating Organizational Change; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001.

Drawing on principles of complexity science, Olson and Eoyang develop a new paradigm for understanding organizations as complex systems that are continually adapting to changes in the environment.

Three Key Principles govern the behavior/evolution of a Complex Adaptive System

1. Order is emergent (as opposed to hierarchical)
2. The system’s history is irreversible
3. The system’s future is often unpredictable

Learning (change) does not come from pre-ordained rules or plans, but rather it emerges from connections and interactions of individuals and groups.

Since an inherently unpredictable system cannot predict the future with absolute certainty, it is important to move ahead (just do it!) without knowing for certain what the outcome will be.

Focus must be on the direction of movement, and quality of participants’ interaction while watching for patterns and clearer direction to emerge.

Edwin E. Olson and Glenda H. Eoyang: Facilitating Organizational Change; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001. pp.158-163

Pattern	Traditional Thinking	CAS Thinking
Sources of Energy for Change (Adaptive Learning)		
Perception of situation	Change must begin and be orchestrated by the top officials in the organization	Change comes from transforming exchanges among networks of people at all levels of the organization simultaneously
Typical Response to Situation	Construct a change initiative focused on developing and implementing a strategic plan	Formal control is relinquished as the organization self-organizes
Usual Outcome	Constrained system with a mix of success and failure and a mix of winners and losers with a new set of problems to be solved	Organization reaches a new state, including reinstitution of necessary controls
Coping with Uncertainty		
Perception of situation	Uncertainty should be minimized through rational analysis of options	Uncertainty is an indicator that the organization has the power to self-organize
Typical Response to Situation	Use of linear methods such as problem solving	Promote uncertainty by identifying significant differences and creating transforming exchanges within a container(safe environment) to hold the interactions
Usual Outcome	Some situations are appropriately managed; many opportunities are lost	Outcomes that work (are adaptive responses to the environment) are identified
Constructing Goals, Plans and Structures		
Perception of Situation	Detailed objectives, plans and structures are necessary to manage the organization	A short list of simple rules is needed to bring coherence to the self-organizing process
Typical Response to Situation	Much effort is put into specification of how authority is distributed	The rules are identified and modified
Usual Outcome	The complicated organizational plans and structures interfere with responding to internal and external customers	Effective behaviors and direction emerge and are recognized

Managing Differences (Amplify difference rather than build consensus)		
Perception of situation	Diverging opinions are necessary and useful as a prelude to converging on consensus	Significant differences are amplified. Consensus is not required
Typical Response to Situation	Creativity session; brainstorming is encouraged until leaders determine that it is time to reach consensus	Continuous process of interacting and action around significant differences, anticipating that learning will occur
Usual Outcome	Decisions are made that are not supported by everyone in the organization	Decisions are made as the next evolutionary step for the system becomes clear
Defining Success (A fit with the environment rather than closing the gap with an ideal)		
Perception of situation	Organization is successful if it reaches its goals	Success is measured as ability to transform to match changing circumstances
Typical Response to Situation	All actions are directed toward goal achievement	Local changes that gain the most immediate improvement are implemented
Usual Outcome	Short-term survival may be assured at the cost of long-term sustainability	Organization is flexible and able to adapt for long-term sustainability

Norms for Learning Teams

While there must be some agreed upon rules for how the group will interact, it is important to keep these norms to a minimum at the start. Add to agreed upon norms as (and if) the need arises.

Here are some norms that have been useful to other learning teams :

- Listen deeply (for meaning and understanding) to other's perspectives..
- Stay actively engaged with the team
- Share your knowledge
- Encourage other team members' participation
- Try out new roles and skills
- If you don't understand something, ask for clarification.
- If you see a problem that others haven't noticed, bring it to someone's attention.
- Treat members' issues and concerns as valid even if you don't agree with them.
- Focus on the positive: what's working well
- Be flexible

Structural Dynamics

Ref. Peter Senge: The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization; New York, NY, Doubleday, 1994. (PP.407-416)

Team Member Action Stances:

Healthy structural dynamics allow all members to move freely between all four stances. When members become locked into one pattern of behavior or action stance (critic, visionary, process observer, etc.), the team's capacity for learning will be diminished.

Mover:

Usually the initiator of the idea; offers direction to the group; the inspirational core of the group, brings the group together

Opposer:

Challenges the actions of the mover, the skeptic, the one counted on to spark innovative and creative answers and solutions

Follower:

Agree with and/or support the opposer or the mover

Bystander:

Observers who critically witness others' actions, able to step back, observe and offer critical reflection

These roles are discerned by observing the **recurring patterns** (not content) of interrelationship and conversation.