

# CREATING A CULTURE OF LEARNING

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# Introduction

Of late, there's been an ongoing debate in the scientific community as to whether intelligence is fixed or changeable.

If intelligence is fixed, then each person's measure is doled out in the womb, and no amount of information acquisition can increase someone's intelligence quotient, or IQ.

But if intelligence is changeable, then people can actually get smarter over time.

And indeed, this seems to be what the evidence shows; intelligence is far more fluid than we've previously been led to imagine.

In **one study**, for example, researchers tested the IQ of 33 healthy adolescents aged 12 to 16 and then tested it again 3 to 4 years later. At the second testing, 33 percent of participants showed a change in their total IQ score.

What does any of this have to do with your workplace, you ask?

Simple! Knowing that intelligence is changeable makes the benefits of learning all the more salient. And, in fact, companies that encourage and value learning are healthier, more stable, and smarter than those that don't. As a result they perform better.

Ray Stata, former CEO of Analog Devices, a semiconductor company, **is quoted as saying**, "The rate at which organizations and individuals learn may well become the only sustainable competitive advantage."

# Commitment to Learning — It's Just Smart

Like much of everything else, an organization's commitment to learning is on a spectrum.

On one end of the spectrum are progressive, forward-thinking companies with a worldwide reputation for continuous cutting-edge innovation and improvement (think Google and Zappos).

Waaaaay over at the other end of the spectrum are companies on the decline. These companies stopped learning a long time ago and are now paying a very serious price for that decision.

Somewhere in between both these extremes are companies on the right track to becoming learning organizations as well as those headed for decline. An organization with a disdain for learning is definitely in that last camp.

When it comes to eschewing learning, company actions speak a whole lot louder than words. Regardless of what leadership may claim, when an organization disdains learning its processes will reveal the truth. In these companies, data are viewed lower than history, tradition, biases, and perception. Review and reflection are practically nonexistent, and no one is held accountable for employee development, which occurs unevenly and in a haphazard, non-strategic manner.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is leadership's unfortunate attitude that it knows it all, has seen it all, and has done it all—that "Company X's Way" is always the best way, even if no one has actually investigated any other way.

To put it bluntly, that's just stupid—which is the very opposite of what you get when you're committed to continuous learning.

# Live And Learn: Google Exec Says “No Thanks” To Goofy Interview Questions

A **2009 article** claimed that Google interview questions would make most of us feel dumb. Apparently, Google interviewers were fond of asking questions like

How many golf balls could fit in a school bus?

How many piano tuners are there in the entire world?

A man pushed his car to a hotel and lost his fortune. What happened?

How many times a day does a clock's hands overlap?

But in a **2013 article**, Laszlo Bock, Senior Vice President for People Operations at Google, is quoted as saying, “... brainteasers are a complete waste of time. How many golf balls can you fit into an airplane? How many gas stations in Manhattan? A complete waste of time. They don't predict anything. They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart.”

Brock goes on to say that what works better is “structured behavioral interviews, where you have a consistent rubric for how you assess people, rather than having each interviewer just make stuff up” as well as behavioral interviewing, “where you're not giving someone a hypo-thetical, but you're starting with a question like, ‘Give me an example of a time when you solved an analytically difficult problem.’”

When a company as successful as Google says it's okay to re-evaluate a process—by publicly criticizing that former process—they've given the rest of us something to think about.

# Definition of a “Learning Culture”

Business changes. Markets change. Technology changes. Even the workforce changes—what employees want and expect from their employers today isn’t exactly what employees wanted and expected from employers 50 or even 15 years ago.

For example, nowadays, not very many employees expect to retire at the job they landed right out of school.

Instead, [one study](#) claims that Millennials (those born between 1977 and 1997) will change jobs 15 to 20 times during their working lives; [another article](#) states that those born between 1954 and 1967 (the “young Baby Boomers”) will change jobs, on average, 11 times. And what does all this mean for businesses? Only those committed to continuous learning (i.e., learning organizations) will discover the answer to that question.

But what is a “learning organization?” According to David Garvin, coauthor of [“Is Yours a Learning Organization?”](#), learning organizations are skilled in two things: (1) creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge and (2) modifying behavior (acting) in response to new knowledge and insight.

## Characteristics of a Learning Organization

Learning organizations intentionally collect information, reflect on that information, and share the findings to improve performance within the organization. As a result, learning organizations are able to adapt quickly in the face of unpredictable situations.

[Peter Senge](#), who studied engineering at Stanford before earning both a Master’s degree in social systems modeling and a PhD in management from MIT, introduced the term “learning organization” in his 1990 publication, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

Garvin refers to three “building blocks” of a learning organization: (1) a supportive learning environment, (2) concrete learning processes and practices, and (3) leadership behavior that provides reinforcement.

# Learning organizations:

## **Provide continuous learning opportunities.**

Whether it's special projects, support of continuing education, community partnerships, or something else altogether, learning organizations always have something going on that's bound to bring more usable knowledge into the fray.

## **Link individual performance with**

**organizational performance.** Learning is directly tied to organizational goals, and employees are held accountable for obtaining the knowledge needed to do their jobs. At the same time, managers are held accountable for directing the learning of employees in a way that helps meet company objectives.

## **Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.**

Not all conflict is bad. In any work environment, people will naturally develop differences of opinion. In healthy organizations, conflict will be seen as normal and expected, and processes to facilitate the peaceful and respectful resolution of conflict will be in place. Furthermore, differences of opinion will be viewed as essential to the development of new, better, and stronger ideas.

## **Use learning to reach their goals.**

Learning is institutionalized, and the learning infrastructure supports business goals. Processes for generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information have been put in place, and these are monitored and analyzed to ascertain their effectiveness.

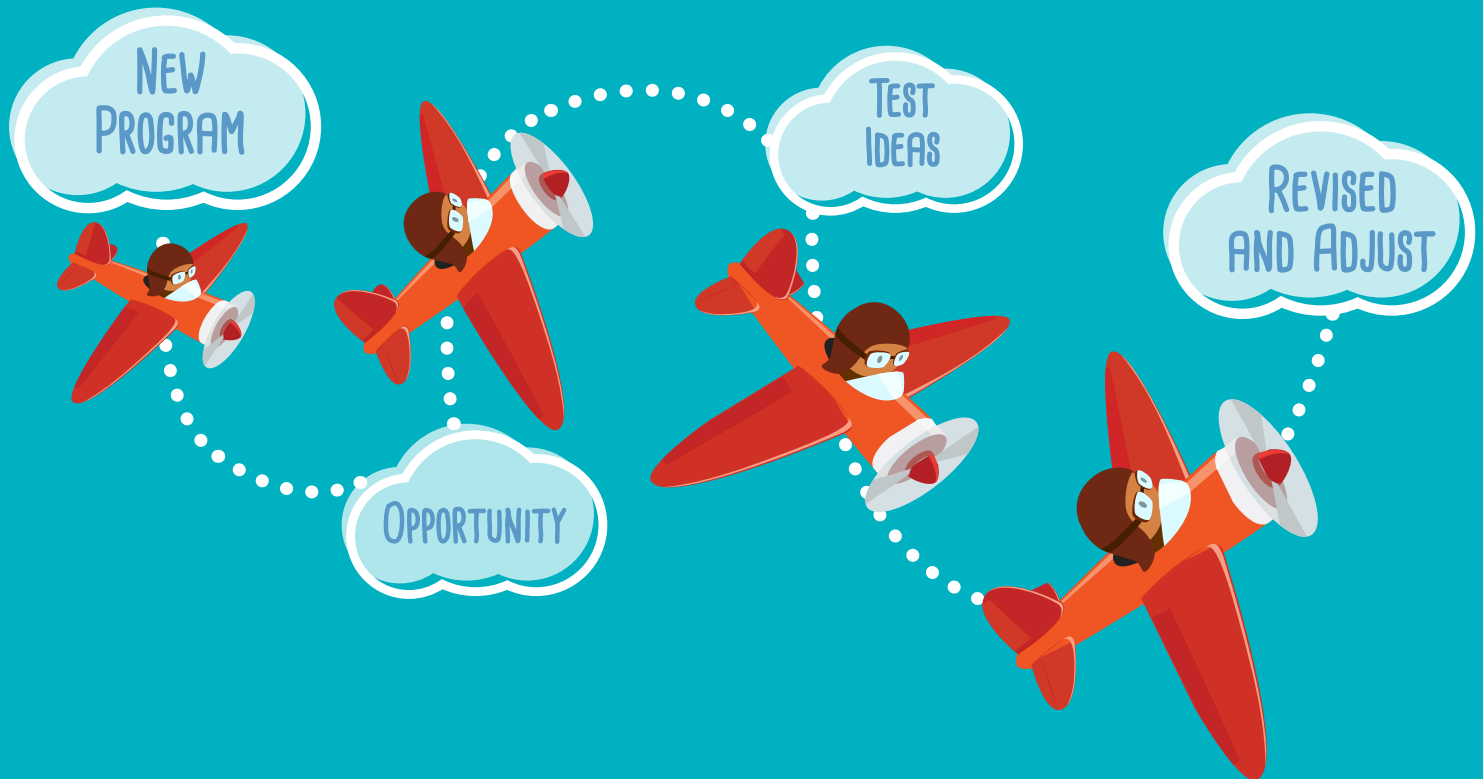
## **Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and**

**take risks.** Employees won't learn if they don't feel psychologically safe. For example, employees need to be able to ask questions without worrying they'll be perceived as naive or stupid. Further, it's important that leadership create a culture where differences of opinion are appreciated and the value of opposing ideas is recognized. Such environments make it possible for employees to respectfully disagree while still remaining open to new ideas.

## **Are continuously aware of and interact with their environment.**

Learning organizations also systematically gather information about their customers, competitors, and technological trends. This information is then shared throughout the organization and used to improve performance. their effectiveness.

# Using Piloting to Gather Information



Piloting is one way that learning organizations experiment with new offerings. A new program will be “piloted” for a defined period, during which the company will gather information and use it to determine if the program should be continued beyond the initial time period.

Piloting provides opportunity for an organization to test an idea under real conditions but with minimal exposure. Piloting also allows for ideas to be revised and adjusted as necessary on a manageable scale.



# Creating A Culture Of Learning: Whose Job is It Anyway?

Learning organizations define responsibilities for capturing, distilling, applying, and sharing knowledge and assign these responsibilities to people throughout the organization. This approach reaches well beyond a traditional “training” department embedded in human resources and involves all levels of employees.

## Senior Leadership

Leaders assume the greatest responsibility for creating a supportive learning environment. They must foster a culture of continuous improvement that values organizational learning. Leaders set the tone for the importance of valuing opposing ideas and appreciating different points of view. They also greatly influence how much time is spent identifying problems, transferring knowledge, and reflecting.

## Human Resources

By providing incentives to encourage learning behaviors and creating and communicating a concrete link between learning, performance and compensation, the HR team can do much to support the learning environment. HR also can develop tools for succession planning and knowledge transfer, facilitate the process of identifying competency requirements for job functions, clearly identify and communicate the market-based salary implications of improved skills or certifications, and manage a system that captures the learning goals of individuals within the organization.

## Trainers/Chief Learning Officers

In learning organizations, the Trainer/Chief Learning Officer arranges for training that broadly supports strategic organizational objectives. This individual also supports the learning goals of individuals. If the organization has a system for capturing individual learning goals, the Trainer/Chief Learning Officer can identify employees that share a similar goal and bring them together. The Trainer/Chief Learning Officer also facilitates and/or develops processes for identifying employees within the organization who can mentor others. Finally, Trainers/Chief Learning Officers are generally responsible for measuring and communicating the impact of learning in the organization.

# Metrics That Matter

How does an organization measure the effects of learning? In the 1950s, Donald Kirkpatrick, an industry thought leader and author of several books on training evaluation and human resource management topics, developed a training measurement tool that still provides values to this day.

Kirkpatrick's four levels of measurement for evaluating organizational training and learning include:

- **Level 1: Reaction** – To what degree do participants react favorably to the training? Did the training include quality content? Was the instructor competent? Was the environment comfortable and conducive to learning? Was the material in alignment to organizational goals?
- **Level 2: Learning** – To what degree did participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, attitudes, confidence, and commitment based on their participation in a training event?
- **Level 3: Behavior** – To what degree did participants apply what they learned during training to their actual jobs?
- **Level 4: Results** – To what degree did targeted outcomes occur as a result of the training event and subsequent reinforcement?

Leadership would also do well to consider the difference between outcome measures, effectiveness measures, and efficiency measures:

- **Outcome measures** capture the impact learning and development is expected to have on the organization's most important goals. For example, a sales training initiative might be expected to contribute 20 percent toward the company goal of increasing sales by 10 percent
- **Effectiveness measures** are indicators of how well learning contributes to organizational outcomes. In other words, effectiveness measures are about quality. The Kirkpatrick model can help to measure learning and development effectiveness
- **Efficiency measures** are indicators of an organization's activity and investment in learning. Examples include the number of learners and the percentage of employees that number represents, the number of courses, cycle times, utilization rates, and training costs



# Common Roadblocks

What are some common roadblocks that get in the way of creating a learning culture?

As implied earlier, a too-heavy reliance on “How we’ve always done things” is one definite impediment. Others roadblocks include:

A lack of clear and measurable goals about using knowledge to improve performance. Strategic clarity around the “why” of organizational learning can bridge this gap.

Insufficient incentives for individuals or teams to participate in organizational learning activities. One way to provide incentives is to incorporate the pursuit of learning into employee evaluations. What new processes did the employee develop? Did he learn a new skill? Did she attend workshops and webinars, earn a certification of some kind, or participate in a company work group? If the employee is a manager, what concrete actions did he or she take to encourage learning in his or her staff?

Uncertainty about the most effective processes for capturing and sharing learning. Gavin et al identify this roadblock as one with a long history: In “Is Yours a Learning Organization?,” they state: “... many of the early discussions about learning organizations were paeans to a better world rather than concrete prescriptions. They overemphasized the forest and paid little attention to the trees. As a result, the associated recommendations proved difficult to implement—managers could not identify the sequence of steps necessary for moving forward.” To help organizations overcome this hurdle, Gavin et al have developed an **assessment tool** that companies can use to determine how well they meet the criteria for a learning organization.

## After-Action Review 101

After-action reviews, best described as systematic debriefing sessions that occur at the end of a project or initiative, are routinely conducted in learning organizations.

Discussion at after-action reviews usually centers around four questions: (1) What did we set out to do? (2) What actually happened? (3) Why did it happen? (4) What do we do next time? The point of after-action reviews is to share lessons and codify results. After-action reviews are essential to effective action. (See: Definition of a Learning Culture)

# Stages Of Learning

Learning is a process. It may be helpful, therefore, for leaders to understand the various stages:

**Stage 1 – Unconscious incompetence.** An individual or team does not understand or know how to do something, and they don't recognize the deficit. They may not even recognize the usefulness of the skill.

**Stage 2 – Conscious incompetence.** The individual or team recognizes the deficit and sees a value in learning a new skill.

**Stage 3 – Conscious competence.** The learner sees new things and has picked up new language. Related assumptions, actions and consequences become clearer. It's challenging to translate the new learned skills and ideas into actions. Some behaviors may change, but the individual's old underlying values and assumptions remain intact. However, learners begin to experiment with new skills and ideas and observe what they yield and to rely on the new language they learned. Still, learners find it difficult to demonstrate new skills and behaviors under stress.

**Stage 4 – Unconscious competence.** Learners have integrated the learning and can speak about it in their own voices. The new skills becomes second nature and can be performed without conscious effort in stressful and ambiguous situations. Learners can aid other learners.

Ultimately, individuals have to be committed to the process. No one can learn something for someone else.

However, leadership can provide opportunity for employees to apply new learning to real job duties. In fact, if leadership doesn't provide this opportunity, learning will be lost, resulting in wasted resources and frustration for both employee and employer. Employees also should be given adequate time for reflection and review. (See: [After-Action Review 101](#))

## Summary

Stata's statement about companies distinguishing themselves through their commitment to learning is compelling because it has the ring of truth. How your organization gathers, analyzes, and uses data—and with that, how your employees are encouraged to gather, analyze and use data—is one of the most important factors, if not the most important factor, in determining how well you'll fare against your competitors.

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