

mentoring human action



Leadership Through Learning Part 4B: Learning and Culture

by Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“To understand corporate culture, and its effect on people and organizations, we need to take a closer look at the learning dynamic, and how it manifests itself in *what does and does not get done around here*. This requires us to think of learning as an essential part of the human condition, and to recognize that every person is learning all of the time.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)

In strategic practice, learning is described as having three levels, four types, and seven modes. This newsletter will focus on the three levels of learning, and how they become ideological or cultural stances. In his early work, Boydell described three levels of learning:

- **Level 1: Implementing:** Getting or doing things right; right according to what other people say is right; learning that what

other people say is *correct*, and taking this in, assimilating it, then applying it to tasks

- **Level 2: Improving:** Making or doing things better; making improvements; thinking for myself, deciding what *I* believe to be *correct*.
- **Level 3: Integrating:** Making or doing better things; working with others to create something new and better, working with an overarching sense of real, shared purpose, within which we respect and support each others’ diverse purposes; using my own ideas *out there* in the world, thus getting things done, solving problems, and creating new processes and products.

It may seem, from these descriptions, that each of these levels is distinct and separate from each other. For example, it is easy to say that a learner operates from only one level. It may also seem that some levels are better than others. For example, Level 2 seems better than Level 1, and Level 3 seems better than Levels 1 and 2. In fact, all of these assumptions are incorrect.

Learning is systemic in nature. This means that people can and do operate from all three levels, depending on the context in which they find themselves. At times, one of the levels of learning is more appropriate than the other two. Each level is appropriate or adequate in certain circumstances. For example, Boydell’s experience and research leads him to believe that:

- **Level 1: Implementing** may be appropriate when situations are relatively stable and predictable.
- **Level 2: Improving** may be appropriate when the change is itself reasonably stable, predictable, non-turbulent, readily measurable, and more or less confined to a relatively definable discrete part of the organization
- **Level 3: Integrating** is almost certainly required in situations in which the change has effects in other parts of the system, now or later on, or is turbulent and chaotic. These conditions are often described as *complex*.

It is clear that a resilient corporate culture is one in which people can learn and work at all three levels, depending on what the situation requires. There is always the need to do various things well, reliably, consistently (Level 1), and to improve the way we do them — to do things better (Level 2). At the same time, there is a need to take a broader view, to involve more people, and to do different or better things — things that are better because they take into account the hopes and aspirations of a wider group of stakeholders (Level 3).

Underlying each level of learning is a set of cultural stories that unfold into a set of accompanying behaviours, creating a *cultural stance*.

- Level 1: Implementing or **Con~forming Stance**
- Level 2: Improving or **Com~peting Stance**
- Level 3: Integrating or **Co~operating Stance**

These are described on the next page:

Con-forming Stance or Learning Level 1

This stance focuses on *doing things well*. Organizational performance is geared toward consistent reliability, achieving best current practices, and satisfying customers. The organizational structure is designed for centralized control, in which purpose, power, and knowledge is located in leadership positions in the hierarchy. Employees possess technical and professional abilities, and are able to design and improve processes and systems in their own areas of expertise, in alignment with the leaders' purpose and direction. There are clear lines of authority, responsibility, and accountability.

Employees are seen as followers.

They are seen as somewhat passive, reactive, dependent, and compliant. They are also seen as having gaps in knowledge, skills, and attitude, and they may not be committed to the organization or its goals.

Leaders are seen as managers.

Leaders are those in positions of purpose, power, and knowledge. Leaders' *stories told* are the only ones that are true, valid, and correct. Employees' *stories told* are irrelevant. Leaders determine what the employees are trying to achieve, and how they are going to achieve it. If there is clarity of direction, leaders formulate and disseminate a clear mission, vision, and strategy, and tell people what to do.

Com~peting Stance or Learning Level 2

This stance focuses on *doing things better*. Organizational performance is geared toward continuous improvement, and delighting customers and suppliers. The organizational structure is designed for centralized control of direction and local empowerment, in which

purpose, power, and knowledge are located in leadership positions in the hierarchy. Local knowledge determines the best way to achieve the leaders' purpose. Employees are able to design and improve processes and systems, and to challenge and question ways of doing things, as long as the challenge is focused on continuous improvement. There are clear lines of authority, responsibility, and accountability, with an emphasis on *self-managed teams*.

Employees are empowered to achieve the organizational goals.

They have more say in what the organization is striving toward, especially in the areas of continuous improvement. Employees are considered *human resources* that are used to achieve the organizational goals.

Managers are seen as leaders.

Leaders are those in positions of purpose, power, and knowledge, although local knowledge determines the best way of achieving hierarchically determined purpose. Leaders' *stories told* are the only ones that will prevail. However, leaders will listen to employees' *stories told*, and take them into account. Leaders empower and create conditions for others to use local knowledge and expertise. Leaders consult with others, build enthusiasm, and inspire commitment.

Co~operating Stance or Learning Level 3

This stance focuses on *doing better things*. Organizational performance is geared toward innovation and invention, and creating partnerships with all stakeholders. The organizational structure is made up of a number of structures, each appropriate for specific purposes. People are *resource~ful*, *knowledge~able*, competent,

purpose~ful, and focused on achieving things outside of themselves.

Employees have power to achieve better things for the organization and the larger context in which the organization operates. They are seen as generative, interdependent, are creatively resourceful, and are able to engage in multiple joint actions. They are also seen as committed to achieving things together.

Everyone is considered to be a leader — a form of *shared leadership*. Leaders are everywhere, with distributed purpose, power, and knowledge. All *stories told* are valid to those who hold them, and for the purpose for which they hold them.

“Each of these cultural stances describes a way in which a cultural system can operate both internally and externally. Any cultural system can operate from one, two, or three stances, depending on its focus. However, deeply embedded in most cultural systems is a preference for one cultural stance.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)



Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

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