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## Learning Organizations Part 7: The Power of Team Learning by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE

"Team Learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the discipline of developing a shared vision. It also builds on personal mastery, for talented teams are made up of talented individuals. ... [When] teams learn, they become a microcosm for learning throughout the organization."

— Peter Senge, **The Fifth Discipline** (1990)

The five disciplines are interrelated; one discipline does not work without the other four playing significant roles. However, team learning and systems thinking are the most difficult disciplines to understand and to achieve. This article is the first of a three-part series focusing on the fourth discipline of **Team Learning**.

Charlotte Roberts, co-author of **The**

**Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, states that team learning and team building are very different. Team building develops the skills of individual members in communication, problem solving, and decision making. Team learning develops a team knowledge and team alignment that results from the *whole* team using specific skills, such as dialogue and skilful discussion, so that the *whole team learns* (p. 355). In team learning, the emphasis is on the word *whole*. Team learning is about the collective whole, rather than the individual parts.

In 1986, I directed a high school production, *Genesis*, for the annual drama festival. This play, the best I had ever directed, won most of the major awards at the Zone Festival. *Genesis* had a cast and crew of over 30 students and adults, most of whom had never been involved in a drama production, and a director who was a math and science teacher with little background in the field of drama.

I had noticed startling results during my last two years of directing. The quality of the productions, as well as the relationships among all of the students and adults involved, was increasing substantially. More and more often, the cast and crew could actually feel the *synergy* in the air. Senge and Roberts call this synergy *team alignment*. "Building alignment ... is about enhancing a team's capacity to think and act in new synergistic ways, with full coordination and a sense of unity, because team members know each other's hearts and minds. ... They develop the capacity to use their disagreements to make the collective understanding richer."

In *Genesis*, the synergy was stronger than ever. We felt it at every rehearsal and during every performance. Each performance grew and changed as we responded to what we had learned from the last performance, and anticipated what the next performance might bring. *Genesis* demonstrated the essence of team learning.

According to Roberts, team learning "starts with self-mastery and self-knowledge, but involves looking outward to develop knowledge of, and alignment with, others on your team." In *Genesis*, the cast and crew worked as a collective whole to achieve a shared vision. The conflicts that occurred, and the ways in which the

cast and crew handled these conflicts, strengthened the team's resolve to explore and to understand the play fully, in order to create an outstanding performance.

Roberts lists several characteristics of a team that is able to learn:

- There is a **practice field**, in which the team can practice the skills of learning together. This practice field is a safe place in which everyone can learn experientially about the team, its members, and the capacities of both the team and individuals. The practice field for *Genesis* was a three-month rehearsal schedule, as well as rehearsals between performances.
- There is an **outside facilitator**, who guides the team through the process of building the skills of critical thinking, skilful discussion, and dialogue. Only an outside facilitator can see clearly the assumptions and mental models that underlie the team's actions. Since *Genesis* contained religious subject matter, I asked a minister to guide us in identifying our assumptions, and in understanding and interpreting the play.
- There are **ground rules** set up for how team learning occurs, how the individual team members tell the truth to each other, how they bring relevant information to the team, how they check and challenge each other, and how they deal with violations of the ground rules. In *Genesis*, over 75% of the vision of the play came from the cast and crew, rather than from the director. Many times, actors would challenge my vision of

how they portrayed a role. In each instance, the result of this dialogue was a better way of playing the scene.

- There is an **ability to forgive** when things don't turn out as planned, and a **capacity to learn from mistakes**. Team learning is not blaming; it is reflecting on what occurred, and learning what to do differently. In *Genesis*, there were times when members of the cast or crew would not perform to their best ability. The result was unexpected, and often difficult for the entire team. After the incident, the cast and crew would reflect on what had happened, and determine strategies to provide safeguards. The **whole team** owned the experience and learned from it

Both Senge and Roberts state that team learning is very hard to implement. Why is this? Roberts states that "the process of learning how to learn collectively is unfamiliar." In other words, most people do not know how to learn as a team. *Genesis* required us to learn as a team; it required all members of the cast and crew to understand their own roles, and how their roles supported others.

As well, team learning requires the team to experience collectively a sense of chaos. Because chaos often looks like confusion and mayhem, it is an uncomfortable state for many people. In *Genesis*, the first two months of rehearsal were extremely chaotic as we explored the potential of the play. The vision, the roles, and the purpose of the play changed as we learned more about what the play meant for us. However, this chaos is really the *cauldron* in which learning occurs (p. 364). Chaos is a necessary

element in developing team learning. Chaos allows the team members to experiment and to find new ways to deal with each other. Chaos also requires the team leader:

- To relinquish control to the team
- To allow the team to find its own way through the apparent chaos
- To allow team learning to emerge in its own time
- To provide guidance that supports the shared vision

Throughout **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, there are constant references to theatre, the arts, and sports. The reason for this is that theatre, the arts, and sports involve rehearsal, reflection, collective process, and experiential learning. This is what team learning is about.

"A team of people sit in a circle on a stage, talking with intensity. In this form of intimate theatre, they are both performers and the audience. They are arguing, because they don't agree, but there's a quality of engagement about their argument. They listen intently to each other's language, rhythms, and sounds. The silences between the statements seem as strong as the words. ... As the people in the circle continue to talk, the sense of meaning they share grows larger and sharper. They begin to gain unprecedented insight into their fundamental views."

— William Isaacs, **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (1994)

**MHA Institute Inc.**  
Unit 248, Suite 205  
259 Midpark Way SE  
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597  
Fax: (403) 257-4649  
E-mail: [info@mhainstitute.ca](mailto:info@mhainstitute.ca)  
Web: [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca)