



Check it out!  
[www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca)

## Building Learning Organizations Part 2: Understanding Learning

by Marilyn Herasymowych, MCE

“Organizations are realizing that they will not survive if they do not change. The result of this need to change is a push toward continuous learning for continuous improvement.”

— Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick, **Sculpting the Learning Organization** (1993)

If you ask people what the word *learning* means to them, you will get many responses: school, discipline, restrictions, rules, structure, feelings of panic, stress, competition, boredom, and tests. These responses mean that people equate learning with a myriad of experiences that may have little to do with what learning actually is. The most troubling aspect of these responses is that so many learning experiences seem to have been negative and unrewarding. As a result, people may harbour negative mental models towards the word, and ultimately the concept of, *learning*.

Yet learning continuously is vital for organizations and for all people within organizations. The individuals, teams, and organizations that value learning and that are willing to learn effectively are those that are better able to respond to the customer’s needs. Today, information may be power, but the **ability to learn effectively** is the key to being successful in the 21st Century.

According to Chris Argyris, author of **Knowledge for Action**, “Learning is not simply having a new insight or a new idea. Learning occurs when we take effective action, when we detect and correct error. How do you know when you know something? When you can produce what it is you claim you know.” To demonstrate this concept, try this activity:

1. Sign your name the way that you would sign a cheque.
2. Now, sign your name with your other (non-preferred) hand.

From this activity, you demonstrate that you *know* how to sign your name with your preferred hand by

quickly signing your name. However, you are not as proficient with your non-preferred hand. Most people really struggle with step 2.

In order to know how to sign your name with your non-preferred hand, you must *learn* how to do this. That is what Argyris means when he says, “learning occurs when we take effective action.” When you practice signing your name with your non-preferred hand, you detect and correct error, and increase your capacity to be effective in this task. Once you know how to do this well, you have acquired knowledge; “you can produce what it is you claim you know.”

There is another aspect to this activity. When you signed your name with your preferred hand, you probably did it without thinking about it. You probably found this activity to be comfortable, natural, and automatic, and you felt competent and in control while signing your name. However, when you signed your name with your non-preferred hand, you might have found it uncomfortable, unnatural, and anything but automatic. As well, you might have felt incompetent and out of control. These feelings are

*assumed* to be undesirable, so we try to avoid them as often as possible.

However, today's workplace requires you to perform work that often feels as uncomfortable as signing your name with your non-preferred hand. If this is where learning occurs, are you avoiding the potential for learning and becoming more effective, by staying *only* in your comfort zone? Today's workplace requires you to *accept* feeling uncomfortable, unnatural, incompetent, and out of control, because you must use these negative feelings as signals that tell you that you are in a place of learning.

In my experience in analyzing organizations and their people for their ability to learn, I have found that neither the organization nor the people within it are capable of creating an environment that fosters learning. This is because neither the organization nor its people know *how* to learn. What organizations and their people do know is how to *antilearn*, or to block any potential for deep and meaningful learning. According to Argyris, almost everything that organizations and their people do, including training programs, is *antilearning*.

Argyris' research has found that we have learned to *antilearn* so well that we are not even aware of it. Therefore, the first step for most organizations and their people is to become aware of what they are doing to create an environment that destroys any potential for learning. It takes great courage and staying power for organizations and their people to look into the mirror, and **to see and accept what is really going on**, because what they see in the mirror often causes great discomfort.

This discomfort is best described as embarrassing and threatening, because we discover that **we do not know**. In a culture that values knowing above learning, we do not want to admit that we do not know. Yet admitting that we do not know is the crucial step to becoming an effective learner.

I challenge you, right now, to prove how much you know about writing with your non-preferred hand. **Write this entire newsletter with your non-preferred hand.** If you do this, you will experience *some* of the discomfort that this kind of deep learning requires. However, I am willing to bet that most of you will not even try this exercise. You will intellectualize it and think about it, but you will not try it. Then, you will become arrogant about it. You will claim that you know. This is precisely what Argyris is talking about: we use antilearning routines to block the potential for learning to occur.

The arrogance that comes from **what you think you know** convinces you that you already *know* what the experience will bring. You will make excuses for not trying: "This is a stupid exercise," "I already know what this will do," "I haven't the time to do this." This is precisely the kind of antilearning routine that you continue to practice in your work, your organization, and your personal life. How can you possibly know what this experience brings if you have not done it? This arrogance and attitude of antilearning is what stops you from learning effectively, because you are content with simply *thinking* that you do know. However, true knowing is being able to "produce what it is you claim you know."

Why do we do this? I believe that all

of our systems have taught us that *to know* is good and *to not know* is bad. We have been punished for not knowing. We have learned to become embarrassed and threatened when we do not know, and that these feelings are not appropriate in our institutions and our culture. Our schools do not reward inquiry that challenges the teacher and the content that is being taught; our schools reward passive behaviour in classrooms and regurgitated content on exams. Our organizations do not reward inquiry that challenges the *status quo*. Our organizations reward conformity to a set of unwritten rules in the workplace and key performance indicators on performance appraisals. When was the last time you heard of anyone being rewarded for asking tough questions and rocking the boat?

"What [programs such as total quality management and training] do not do is get people to reflect on their work and behaviour. They do not encourage individual accountability. And they do not surface the kinds of deep and potentially threatening or embarrassing information that can motivate learning and produce real change."

— Chris Argyris, **Good Communication That Blocks Learning** (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)