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Building Learning Organizations Part 3: Building Learning Infrastructures

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"The impulse to learn, at its heart, is an impulse to be generative, to expand our capability. This is why leading corporations are focusing on *generative learning*, which is about creating, as well as *adaptive learning*, which is about coping."

— Peter Senge, *The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations*, *Sloan Management Review* (1990)

Most organizations are very good at *adaptive learning*; that is, learning to adapt to the changing environment. However, since adaptive learning uses established ways of thinking, it does not create *new* ways of thinking about difficult and complex situations. Adaptive learning is based on problem solving, but that is only one part of learning. The second part of learning is how each person in an organization

"contributes to the organization's problems, and then changes the way they act" (Argyris, 1991). Without *generative learning*, organizations, and the people within organizations, fall prey to the same reactive thinking and behaviours that are used each time a crisis arises, even when these behaviours no longer work.

According to Senge, *generative learning* "requires new ways of looking at the world, whether in understanding the customer or in understanding how to better manage a business" (1990). Therefore, generative learning requires us to be able to see our own thinking and behaviours as they really are, rather than as we wish they were. This sounds much simpler than it is. When faced with looking at our behaviours, we seldom take responsibility for them. Instead, we fall into defensive routines that save us from perceived embarrassment or threat.

Chris Argyris has conducted many

studies of leaders, managers, employees, and consultants in a variety of contexts. In almost every case, he has found that when people are faced with their own behaviours in situations that may seem *embarrassing* or *threatening*, they will find ways to shift the focus from examining their own behaviours to blaming someone else or something else for their behaviours. This is not a good or a bad thing to do; it is simply what most people do when they are faced with perceived embarrassing or threatening situations.

It is extremely difficult for leaders to facilitate this kind of deep reflection and to set up the opportunity to examine individual behaviours in safety. Argyris has conducted several studies in which the leader of a team allowed an open forum to discuss behaviours of all of the people on the team, including the leader. In all cases, the leader was open to criticism about his or her behaviour. However, when the leader asked the members of the team about their own behaviours, the members of the team resorted to

blaming others for their behaviours, instead of looking at how their behaviours contributed to the issue at hand.

Even more shocking, Argyris has found a greater degree of defensiveness in people who have higher levels of education. In order to cope, these people avoid embarrassment by using an established way of thinking and behaving; they become defensive and blame others for their behaviour. If these people were to use *generative* learning behaviours, they would be able to examine their own defensive routines, the thinking that led to their defensive routines, and the resulting behaviours. Then, they would have generated new thinking and behaviours from what they learned.

To create the opportunity for *generative* learning, we must build more effective thinking patterns that actually *generate* alternatives, especially in times of stress and crisis, when we are most likely to become defensive. More effective thinking patterns allow us to use *any failure* or crisis as a learning opportunity for generating alternatives, instead of habitually getting caught in our defensive routines. One of the ways to build more effective thinking patterns is to create a practice field, or learning lab, in which members of a team can practice new thinking patterns, while solving real-time organizational problems.

To understand learning labs, we must look at the fields in which they are currently practiced (e.g., sports, theatre). These fields set up a discipline of running a play, a scene, or a piece of music, over and over again. The rules are strict, and

timing is essential. The scenes are played over and over again with small variations, until they are the best that they can be. Each person plays an integral part, and is responsible for, and accountable to, both himself or herself, and the group as a whole. When rehearsals are over, the group goes into performance.

The discipline that these practice fields require is an example of the *learning infrastructure* that provides for effective practice fields. Senge's five disciplines are another example: as *disciplines*, they require commitment to a set of governing principles, ways of thinking, and rules. The rules or controls, paradoxically enough, allow the freedom and flexibility to learn new thinking patterns and behaviours that are required to achieve exceptional performance.

The learning lab is the same. There is a discipline, and a commitment to that discipline, that is required in order for learning to be effective. The activities within the learning lab provide a *learning infrastructure* that is specifically designed to enhance learning, by both eliciting desired thinking and behaviours, and inhibiting habitual and/or unproductive thinking and behaviours. It is this type of structure that allows new behaviours to emerge and to be practiced in safety.

In learning labs, people experience activities that use a method called *action learning* (**InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 7). These action learning activities provide a safe environment in which teams can practice alternative scenarios and methods. As a matter of fact, teams can do the same activity over and over again, in order to try different approaches each time. If teams were to do this, they

would be approaching the level of comfort with learning labs that is found in theatre and sports.

Why must we pay attention to discipline and rehearsal? In order to establish new ways of thinking, and new behaviours, we need to be able to practice new patterns. The brain is programmed to establish patterns in order to function in a complex world (**InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 2). Most often, our brains use patterns that were established many years ago, many of which are *antilearning* patterns (**InfoMine**, Vol. 3, No. 1). In learning labs, we are able to establish a different and more effective *critical thinking pattern* (**InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 1). If we practice this critical thinking pattern enough, we will be able to use it when a real crisis occurs, so that we can surpass our capabilities, and become exceptionally effective.

“Companies can learn how to resolve the learning dilemma. What it takes is to make the ways managers and employees reason about their behaviour a focus of organizational learning and continuous improvement programs. Teaching people how to reason about their behaviour in new and more effective ways breaks down the defenses that block learning.”
— Chris Argyris, *Teaching Smart People How to Learn*, **Harvard Business Review** (May-June 1991)

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