

THIRD ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING TAKEAWAY

by Cherielyn Leong

As an avid gardener, Prof Hawkins is naturally keen on sustainable and mindful practices to help organisations become better. To help organisation members grow and sustain their growth in a productive way, Prof Hawkins shared what he termed as the “Darwinian law of organisational survival”, i.e., **“organisational learning must be greater or equal to the speed of environmental change.”**

To meet demands for continuous growth, our organisations may find organisational learning helpful and put in place corresponding practices and processes. Let’s examine some helpful practices and processes to help grow the entire organisation system.

Organisational learning is defined as a multi-disciplinary concept that is commonly described as a process of developing, retaining and transferring knowledge within an organisation¹. The sharing of knowledge within the system, as members from different teams and groups access the shared insights and apply them or add to them as and when appropriate generates self-sustaining energy for continuous learning.

CSC Visiting Fellow Peter Hawkins, Emeritus Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School, Chairman of Renewal Associates, co-founder of the Global Team Coaching Institute is a leading consultant, coach, writer and researcher in organizational strategy, leadership, culture change.

He visited CSC recently and conducted an Organisation Transformation Clinic for OD and Transformation practitioners. Among several key points he shared, three stood out particularly in association with the OD community’s work in our Public Service Agencies.

If you missed the Clinic, no worries. We distilled three takeaways and will elaborate further with research references on the topics to support practitioners to apply the insights to work. Read on to find out.

¹ Chuah, K.B. & Law, Kris M.Y (2019), “What is organisational learning?”; Springer-Link, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-23997-8_1

To bolster this learning energy, take a look at some complementary practices that organisations with successful L&D programmes use²;

IDENTIFY A NORTH STAR TO GUIDE L&D DECISIONS

This refers to an over-arching objective that informs decisions about employee skills and development. Tying this with strategic goal setting is to do a review of the core skills required by organisation employees to reach the goals.

ESTABLISH A SKILLS BASELINE

Inventorise your employees' current skills and capabilities to identify the skills gaps. If your organisation is large, it may make sense to break down the skills audit into business units or by job functions. This 'de-centralised' approach is more agile and allows space for continuous updating of the current state of skills in the organisation segments.

ENSURE THAT YOUR OWN L&D TEAM HAS THE RIGHT SKILLS AND RESOURCES

The L&D landscape is fast evolving, so it would matter if your own L&D team is equipped with the necessary skills. This is especially relevant for future-oriented skills and capabilities you intend to bring in or facilitate for your organisation. One way to help L&D colleagues get down to outlining the skills needed is to curate an understanding of the challenges the new skills and capabilities intend to address. This helps to sharpen the perspectives needed to shortlist relevant skills and capabilities. This can be done as a facilitated dialogue for your organisation levels too.

DESIGN LEARNING TO ACCOMMODATE EVOLVING CONDITIONS

Use hybrid work as an opportunity to switch from event-based classroom training to more organic learning, to be "just in time, just enough and just for me". These can be short video clips, discussion sessions on SG Teams, Zoom or your own Intranet forum. In addition, if you have already mapped out learners' profiles for your colleagues and determined what skills they need to acquire, this information can help in designing virtual bite-sized learning. To go even further, connect organisation members to learn by working on cross team projects that support picking up the specific capabilities highlighted for your organisation. Such cross team arrangements help contribute to engagement, i.e., expanding employees' social networks and sharing the load to help the organisation achieve its strategic goals.

² Collings, D.G. & McMackin, J. (2021), "The Practices that Set Learning Organisations Apart", MIT Sloan Management Review, Workforce Skills section, Summer 2021 edition; <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-practices-that-set-learning-organizations-apart/>

Organisational learning, when done intentionally, helps the entire organisation system expand capacity. By building the learning experience into everyday life in the organisation, it creates a self-sustaining motivation among employees to explore new pathways of doing work and generating results. Individual employees who are curious and open to acquiring knowledge bring back great ideas and initiatives for their teams. Teams that share ideas and align work with the strategic goals generally lift up the whole system they operate in.

While organisational learning principles may sound very much like the “Learning Organisation” (LO) practices popular in the 1990s and 2000s, it is not about LO. Holding an organisational learning lens enables OD practitioners³ to be adaptable to the speed of change in the work environment, to distil what needs to be addressed in the organisation to meet the changes. It helps us become sensitive towards our own attitudes on change, so that we find ways to learn from the change and shape our organisation processes to accommodate or respond actively towards the changes.

Just like Prof Hawkins said, we must be mindful of the speed of organisational learning, as in how fast we pick up what needs to be learnt to be effective and responsive. Even better is to help put in place an organisational learning system in our own Agencies to match or surpass the pace of change. It is also about building new alliances with your L&D teams to infuse learning as a strategy for sustaining employee engagement and growth.

By doing so, we are saying yes to strengthening our organisational agility & sustainable motivators for ourselves, our teams and our organisations.

FEEL LIKE YOU NEED MORE?

Look out for our upcoming self-paced “Building the Agile Organisation” e-module later in the year to learn a helpful framework to build Agility in the organisation.

Those of us who want to pick up more facilitation skills to support organisational learning dialogues and more, look out for our "CRFA201: Designing Facilitated Interventions for OD Practitioners" programme on more advanced facilitation skills for organisational contexts and challenges.

³ Garvin, David A. (1993), “Building a Learning Organisation”; Harvard Business Review; <https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization>