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Riding the Current: Assessing the Learning Potential of Your Organization

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You either believe in your people or you don't. ...and they know it! ...and they act accordingly.

When it comes to building healthy organizations this is the true litmus test. Do the people that work with you sense that you care about them, value them, and want them to succeed? Do they feel that you support their growth and development? And most importantly do they feel trusted with the success and direction of the organization? For the past number of months, I have been working with OPC and Innovaction to study the underlying dynamics of 'change-friendly' organizations. What we have found in countless human service organizations is that the more free flowing trust there is in an organization, the greater its' learning potential. It is clear that when employees feel that they play a meaningful role in the development and success of their organization, they are motivated to push the limit of their own potential. To be able to stay afloat in today's turbulent and unpredictable waters of change, organizations are discovering that they must harness this often untapped and powerful resource – the learning potential of their people.

Both OPC and its sister organization, Innovaction, are committed to helping build healthier organizations by providing people with the knowledge, resources and supports they need to create the changes they desire. Over the past several years, it has become evident that certain organizations are more successful in implementing the changes they desire, and often do so despite fewer resources, bigger obstacles and seemingly 'too simple' strategies and plans. In studying these 'change-friendly' organizations certain common practices have emerged, each of which serve to demonstrate to employees that they are valued as persons in their own right – as living, learning, developing beings and not just cogs in the wheels of the organizational machinery.

Recently, we have developed a five-level model that integrates these practices into a process that reflects deepening commitment to the growth of the individual, and increasing support for individual and organizational learning. But it would be wrong to think of this as a quick fix to the problems that plague your organization – this is not a 'five easy steps to a learning organization' approach. The practices outlined in this model are effective because they demonstrate an organization's belief in its people. It demands much more than employee appreciation luncheons to improve morale and productivity. It means breaking free of some long-standing, yet ultimately disabling, ideas about what constitutes a healthy organization. It demands change not just at the level of action, but moreso at the level of how we think. As Peter Senge outlines in *The Fifth Discipline*, his landmark text on learning organizations:

We have a tendency to see the changes we need to make as being in our outer world, not in our inner world. It is challenging to think that while we redesign the manifest structures of our organizations, we must also redesign the internal structures of our "mental models." But 'redesigning mental models' is not like redesigning a piece of engineering equipment. We do not 'have' mental models. We 'are' our mental models. They are the medium through which we and the world interact. They are inextricably woven into our personal life history and sense of who we are.

By following through on the principles and practices outlined in the five level model you provide evidence to employees that not only are they cared about in this organization but are pivotal to its' success. Briefly, the five levels of the model (described more fully in the preceding article) are:

- **Providing supportive workplace conditions** – treating people as people, with lives outside of work, and with value beyond their to-do list
- **Creating a climate for change** – providing the support and information people need in order to contribute to the process of creating change
- **Building a culture of shared accountability** – where all employees, and other key stakeholders, become co-creators of the organization's future
- **Enhancing capacity for learning** – encouraging continuous learning at both the individual and collective level
- **Nurturing learning communities** – supporting and encouraging groups of people, both inside and outside the organization, who share a vision for change and who are prepared to act on it

Working from this model, we have developed a series of questions designed to allow us to determine what level an organization is at. This information is invaluable in planning the most appropriate change initiative, and thereby reducing the risk of failure from going too far, too fast.

After interviewing people from a variety of organizations, some interesting findings emerged. Of the five levels, *Building a Culture of Shared Accountability* is the most critical to showing people what their organization really believes about them – whether the organization's leader believe in them. This is the stage where employers or managers must "put their money where their mouths are" and demonstrate how much they trust employees by sharing the power to determine the future of the organization. This is a powerful gesture of faith. We've found that employees who work in an organization with a culture of shared accountability seem more willing to tolerate weaknesses at other levels of the model. They accept the fact that these problems are neither deliberately created nor ignored, and also that they are empowered to work toward finding solutions.

For example, several interviewees in such an organization noted that their organization did not provide adequate professional development money or opportunities. But, at the same time, they were quick to point out ways in which the organization is supportive in other ways that matter more to them, and that reinforce their belief that they are truly valued. Conversely, other interviewees described their workplaces as achieving certain benchmarks of basic support, such as professional development funding and flexible work schedules, yet admitted that they did not feel that they were truly valued and trusted by their employer. These interviewees went so far as to question the motives behind their employers' actions because, when it came to the critical point of demonstrating trust, their employers were not prepared to include the employees in determining the future of the organization. Ultimately, it is this leap of faith that makes the difference between an average organization and one that is a living, growing, evolving entity fuelled by the learning potential of all of its people.

Another striking example came from an interview with a nurse employed by a large hospital. The hospital had undergone re-structuring but her position was secure – she had benefits, had progressed to the level of team leader, and was on track for an managerial position eventually. However, when offered the opportunity to work in a research position in the same hospital, on a one-year contract, she left her old job without hesitation despite the apparent lack of security and benefits. When asked about her new job, she reported;

I am developing new skills and I feel more confident. My supervisor trusts me to make decisions on my own. I have much more autonomy and independence than in my other position and that's what makes all the difference to me.

When interviewed 6 months later, with the end of her contract approaching, she reported that her confidence in herself and her skills had developed to the point that she was eagerly seeking her next challenge.

I'm looking at jobs that I wouldn't have considered before. I feel a sense of security in my skills – in what I can do. Having permanent employment for the sake of job security doesn't mean much to me anymore.

In this example, it is the quality of the relationship between this nurse and her supervisor that made all the difference. Her supervisor had created a sense of 'shared accountability' that gave her the support to develop her skills. And what organization wouldn't be thrilled to have its ranks populated by people who are so obviously 'ready, willing and able' to take on new challenges and find new ways to make a contribution.

Our findings clearly suggest that, in organizations where there is shared accountability, people feel intrinsically supported and valued because they 'own' a share in the power that drives the organization. Once this sense of collective ownership has been established there is still room for improvement and refinement at all of the other levels of development. However, in this type of organization, such changes are not only more easily accomplished, but will also lead to more sustainable growth.

To use the analogy of a river, an organization starts out as a free flowing body of water, with the power to pass over or around obstacles if it can find its own 'natural' path. Its considerable power can best be harnessed through shared ownership in pursuit of a truly shared vision. However, when a few people with power take it upon themselves to divert the course of the river in their attempts to engineer and control its path, the strength of its flow is diminished. As the river encounters the tightly controlled dams of hierarchy, the water begins to flow back on itself and stagnates. That is the problem with many of today's slow-moving organizations. They have been immobilized by management's efforts to gain control. In the process they have lost both the power and the creative 'order' that can only a workforce of committed employees can produce. They have squandered the potential of people rising daily to the challenge of being believed in, and thriving on the opportunities they have to grow.

Statements from interviewees capture these differences. In an organization where a culture of shared accountability exists, employees said, "We need to take a look at our professional development practices

in our organization", as opposed to blaming management for inaction, or worse. Creating such a shift can be challenging because it requires each person see themselves as part of the problem and, at the same time, part of the solution. We've also found that, regardless of the current structure of an organization, many people still behave in accordance with the 'ghosts of hierarchy'. These ghosts are apparently either going to fix the problem, or tell someone what to do next – they are not easily banished.

A common question today's managers ask is, "How do I get staff to take the initiative, to implement the changes we all agree are necessary?" Even those managers who genuinely want to work in a culture of shared accountability often aren't sure how to make it happen. Employees may also yearn for the same thing, but hesitate to take the initiative because they don't believe that management will support the shift. The result – management and staff find themselves stuck in a 'wait and see who takes the first step' deadlock which blocks the necessary steps to change. To break this pattern it is essential that instead of looking for someone to blame, all parties share the responsibility of this problem, which is both generated and maintained by the organizational system. This step, of identifying patterns that require changing within the organization is a pivotal one in the development of a learning organization. It starts with an openness to question why things are the way they are. Through discussion, the pattern or feedback process can be discovered and then acted on.

Now ask yourself "What kind of organization do I work for?" Does it remind me of a meandering stream, a babbling brook or the Niagara River? Or does it more closely resemble a murky, stagnant, mosquito-breeding pond? Why is it like this? Perhaps the following questions can provide some useful starting points for your exploration:

1. Based on how your organization treats you, what does that suggest about how your organization sees its people? How does this affect your attitude and actions, both on and off the job?
2. In what ways does the organization demonstrate to you that it values and respects you as a person – a person with intrinsic value, and with a life outside of work?
3. In what ways does your organization encourage you to 'take an ownership stake' in its future? What freedom, authority and support does it provide to make this possible?
4. To what extent are all of the people who belong to the organization – management and staff – working from a shared vision? What part have you had in shaping it, and can you see how your work contributes to achieving it?
5. What can you do to engage others in your organization in discussing these questions? What steps can you take to help to get the river flowing again?