II. The 'learning organization'

Robert Garratt was one the first authors who used the term 'learning organization'. In 1987 he intended to provide a management system which could integrate different management concepts that were a part of 'management studies' during that period (Garratt, 1987).[1] [2] According to this author, some problems were not addressed by top managers at that time. In his opinion, in most of the companies, there were not open debate mechanisms for reflecting on policy and strategy and for integrating feedback from business projects and the outside world. Top managers were in charge of what he called 'brainless organizations', "an unthinking machine, which was doomed to a long and painful organizational death as it became estranged from its environment and the knowledge, good will, and commitment of its workforce" (Garratt (1987:19)). For him, one important factor in 'brainless organizations' was that managers did not take a true 'directing' role in the companies and were not themselves really engaged in continuous learning.[3]

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[1] 'Organizational learning', 'system thinking', 'policy and strategy theory', managing as a 'holistic' process or new ideas about generating vision.

[2] The economic depression in United Kingdom in that decade provoked that managers reflected on new ways of management. He realized that what was proposed at that time in numerous academic conferences in Europe and USA, in order to solve this economic business crisis, had already been put into practice by British businessmen. Lean structures, better use of capacities and abilities of workers, concern with product design, responsive to the market, and effective learning-whilst-doing were the key points that this British companies were implementing in those days. As Garratt pointed out, it was central to these ideas the fact that "learning has become the key developable and tradable commodity of an organization" and "the learning of the organization and its people is becoming the core of any organization which has a chance of surviving in the long term" (Garratt (1987:10)). Learning was the answer to survival in a changing environment.

[3] Garratt argued that they reached the highest position in the organizations due to his specialised expertise, but afterwards, they were not able to become generalist and to cross organizational cultures in order to provide true direction to their organizations (Garratt, 1987).

Thus, Garratt focused on providing guides to top managers to become leaders of a LO, because, in his opinion, top managers that are able to learn continuously and to give direction are the key for setting up an effective and surviving organization. He provided 'the learning organization model' in which the directors play the central role of integrators of information flows coming from a double-loop (the 'external environment'/policy loop and the 'internal environment'/operations loop), synthesizing those flows, and "allow learning and development through the adaptation to change of the whole" (Garratt (1987:78). Directors would be the 'business brain' in Garratt's model (Garratt (1987:78). Thus, for him, leadership is the key in a LO and therefore, he focuses on characteristics that an effective director has to have to be able to transform its organization in a LO: general integrated overview of the total business, delegation, coaching, direction, balance between achieving and nurturing, time for reflection and learning to design the future rather than just react (Garrat (1987:124)). It would seem that the LO would just be a logical consequence of a leader acting according to his recommendations. However, he has not been much quoted in LO literature, despite the fact that he already pointed out at that time two important factors that play a crucial role in a LO theory: leadership and information about the external and the internal environment.[4]

One year later Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell were commissioned by the former 'Manpower Services Commission' to research new ways of working in British companies. They wrote the *Learning Company Report* (1988) that was the bottom layer for subsequent works (Pedler *et al.*, 1989, 1991). Having reflected on the LO and researched about British company work and processes, they provided a list of eleven different characteristics of a learning company or LO. In my opinion, they can be clustered in three different groups according to their content: those related to organization strategy ('learning approach to strategy' and 'participating policy making'); those linked to structures ('enabling structures' to look inside the organization – 'informating', 'formative accounting & control', 'internal exchange', 'reward flexibility'- and to look outside the organization –'boundary workers as environmental scanners' and 'inter-

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[4] Moreover, I believe that his book surely informed Senge's ideas later.

company learning'); and those connected to learning opportunities ('learning climate' and 'self-development opportunities for all') (Pedler, 2006). Despite its apparent practical approach, this model mixes up altogether values, attitudes, principles, processes and systems. This ambiguous combination can create confusion in managers that try to implement this model in their organizations. However, it introduces several significant ideas that have been influential in future literature: planning and strategy as a learning process, participation of all organization members and key stakeholders in policy making and collection of external information, flexible and temporary structures, the idea of a continuous learning atmosphere, self-development of all organization individuals and rewarding as a system for fostering personal contributions. Thus, a LO would be, according to these authors, "an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context" (Pedler et al., 1997). Consequently, these authors emphasize the participative role of all workers in learning and the conscious transformation of the organization and its environment.

Two years later Peter Senge (1990) wrote his book *The Fifth Discipline.The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, which made this concept publicly known not only among academicians but also among practitioners. Grounded on previous mentioned books and on organizational learning and systems thinking theories, he succeeded in making this concept inspiring and provocative for managers, which is one of the reasons for his pre-eminence in the field, although his optimistic and utopian writing style has been highly criticised by academic literature (Jackson, 2000; Coopey,1998). After the publication of that book many consultants and practitioners addressed him for advice about an implementable model of the LO, but Senge has declared several times that the LO concept would be more an inspiring vision[5] to which

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[5] "The learning organization is a thing we create in language. Like every linguistic creation, this category is a double-edged sword that can be empowering or tranquilizing. The difference lies in whether we see language as a set of labels that describe a pre-existing reality, or as a medium in which we can articulate new models for living together." (Kofman & Senge (1993:16))

organizations should aspire if they want to be able to adapt to changes in its environment[6] than

a ready-made model to follow. It would also be a way for integrating experimentation in

organizations in an articulated way.

Two key points in Senge's theory are that "organizations learn only through individuals who

learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no

organizational learning occurs." (Senge (1990:139)); and "individual learning, at some level, is

irrelevant for organizational learning. Individuals learn all the time and yet there is no

organizational learning. But if teams learn, they become a microcosm for learning throughout

the organization." (Senge (1990: 236)) Thus, Senge's famous five 'disciplines'[7] are focused on

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[6] "We are taking a stand for a vision, for creating a type of organization we would truly like to work within and which can thrive in a world of increasing interdependency and change. It is not what the vision is, but what the vision does that matters." (Kofman & Senge (1993:16))

[7] To try to reach that inspiring vision, Senge proposes to follow what he calls 'five disciplines'. Most of discussion about LO theory has its origin, in my opinion, in his use of word 'discipline'. According to Cambridge Dictionary 'discipline' has two main meanings: a) "training which produces obedience or self-control, often in the form of rules, and punishments if these are broken, or the obedience or self-control produced by this training"; and b) "a particular area of study, especially a subject studied at a college or university". However, Senge is not using this word in any of these meanings. "The five learning disciplines differ from more familiar management disciplines in that they are 'personal' disciplines. Each has to do with how we think, what we truly want, and how we interact and learn with one another." (Senge (1990:11). Thus, these Senge's disciplines are individuals' ways of thinking ('systems thinking', 'mental models', 'personal mastery' and 'shared vision') and interacting inside the organization ('team learning') to learn and innovate. They are not academic areas of study, although it has been interpreted in that way by many practitioners and consultants later. In fact, due to the ambiguity and vagueness but attractiveness of Senge's ideas, many business managers equally asked him to provide some practical tools to implement this new behaviour in individuals in organizations, although, what they were really asking for was a LO model to implement it. In the first pages of his book Peter Senge himself already alerted about the danger of applying 'ready-made' recipes (''best practices' of so-called leading firms' (Senge (1990:11)) (what can be viewed, in my opinion, as a clear reference and criticism to Pedler's book); and pointed out that "practicing a discipline is different from emulating a 'model'" (Senge (1990:11)).

However, in 1994 Senge changed his opinion and together with other authors wrote the book *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, where the disciplines were described as "lifelong programs of study and practice" (Senge et al. (1994:6)) and different tools and techniques were provided by the authors to implement their LO model in real companies and to put the concepts into practice. Thus, what was initially a group of ideas about new ways of thinking and interacting for learning and innovating was presented later (and interpreted subsequently by theorists and practitioners) as a manual for change, for transforming traditional hierarchical bureaucratic organizations in innovative democratic flat learning organizations. This seems to me the simultaneous source of its success and its critiques, and the origin of a vast literature trying to define what is a LO, what characteristics it has and how we create that kind of organizations in real organization life. Because these disciplines were not management concepts convertible in managerial tools, directly applicable in organizations, but a reflection on a different way of being and thinking inside organizations. Learning organizations would be, then, those that follow those disciplines and therefore, are "expanding their own capacity to hold and seek a vision, to reflect and inquire, to build collective capacities and to understand systems" (Senge (1994:7)).

the individual behaviour as a thinking and reflective individual and as a member of a learning team. Therefore, in a learning organization the individual would continually reflect on and deepen their personal vision and goals both in the organization context and in their personal professional career ('personal mastery' discipline); he would develop a personal capability of bringing key assumptions ('mental models' discipline) about important business issues to the surface and cultivating reflection and inquiry skills; he would hold a shared picture of the future the individual and his colleagues want to create ('shared vision' discipline); he would practice dialogue and discussion in order to propitiate a team which is able to create the results its members truly desire and learn ('team learning' discipline); and he would be able to see the 'structures' that lie beneath complex situations for determining what kind of solutions would cause best change ('systems thinking' discipline) (Senge, 1990). In fact, Senge's vision of LO is calling for an individual transformation which will change the organization in order to adapt to the environment or to modify it. That is why Senge's concept is so difficult to apply and to accept, because it assumes that managers will be able to lead people to self-conviction about the need to change in order to facilitate adaptation and innovation in their organizations. He was proposing a modification in mentality, a 'shift of mind' in individuals (Senge (1990:68)), when managers were, though, looking for simple managerial tools for organizational change. This fact has been the hidden trigger for most of the latter critiques to the concept because when practitioners try to put these ideas into practice they deal with them as tools not as guiding principles. Even management academicians were confused about his ideas because as management theorists expected a book of management theory to cope with management concepts and not with almost 'spiritual'-'religious' notions.

Thus, in the beginning of 90s LO landscape was dominated by Garratt who tried to convince directors to become learning top managers, Senge who attempted to transform individuals at work into self-reflective beings and Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell who aimed to infer and show what characteristics organizations which successfully survive in a changing environment have

and tried to encourage organizations to turn into 'learning companies'. So, leaders, workers and organizations were massively attracted to learning makeovers. While Garratt and Senge were mainly focused on individual behaviour, mentality change and values and principles, Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell introduced some guidelines and ideas about structures (on information systems and accounting and control). However, they all failed to propose a practical framework to put these changes into practice. Their proposals were vague, hazy and uncertain. That is why other authors either tried recurrently to further develop the concept of LO, intending to create an articulate structure or model to carry out in companies (Garvin, 1993; Órtenblad, 2004; Thomsen & Hoest, 2001; Kelleher,2004; Watkins & Marsick, 1993); or criticised it, pointing out its deficiencies and utopianism (Coopey, 1998; Driver, 2002; Symon, 2002; Tosey, 2005) or provided benchmarks against which any organization can assess its capacity for continuous learning (Bennet & O'Brien, 1994; Goh & Richards, 1997). But unfortunately both those who try to propose a coherent model of LO and those who suggest benchmarks, again mix up values, principles, structures and processes in their models and benchmarks without making any distinction between different ontological categories. Similarly sometimes models are proposed to be used like benchmarks to evaluate learning level in an organization and other times benchmarks are suggested to be applied like models to implement LO concept. Both approaches suppose, in my opinion, a concept error. That is why the application of LO concept in existent companies has often been so frustrating for managers.

Therefore, it is necessary to propose a model, grounded on LO main authors (Garratt, Senge and Pedler et al.) and later literature, which will be able to differentiate clearly between what I will call "the ethics of learning organization" (which includes what previous authors have proposed as behaviours, ways of thinking and acting, attitudes, values and principles) and "the 'learning organization' infrastructure" (which includes processes, systems and tools); and which should take into account advantages, barriers and obstacles that these ideas will find in

different kinds of organizations.[8] From this model I will extract the main points that serve me

as guidelines to analyze the organization I have chosen as a case study, the ZKM.

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[8] Private/public, profit/non-profit, business/cultural, formal structure/project-based organizations, etc.