

### **III. Developing a model of the 'learning organization'**

#### **III. 2 The ethics of the 'learning organization'<sup>1</sup>**

By this expression I mean the combination of values, ways of thinking, spirit and culture of an organization which promotes learning in the organization. Literature about LO is mostly a literature about these issues although these topics are currently presented as management tools instead of ways of behaviour and thought. In my opinion, all these issues can be articulated in a different manner where reflection, participation and sharing of knowledge are the behavioural pillars that must inform the attitude, spirit and behaviour of people in the LO. These pillars can only support learning in the whole organization if relationships between members are ruled by openness and trust that allows people to propose new ideas, put them in practice, be rewarded for simply making proposals or their implementation being successful and not to be afraid of being reprimanded if there are mistakes or the solutions proposed do not have the expected results, provided these mistakes serve as a learning experience for the future.

So, grounded on previous literature, I propose that a LO, from this behavioural and ethical point of view, would be an organization where, in order to reach the common objectives and vision of the organization, reflection (self-reflection and organizational reflection) and inquiry, participation at all levels and continuous sharing of knowledge take place in an open and trusting atmosphere which promotes risk-taking and recognition and where mistakes are key learning experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1, p.41.

In LO literature there is a common understanding about the necessity of having a collective, shared and common vision (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Bennett & O'Brien, 1994) and clarity of purpose and mission (Goh & Richards, 1997) to aspire to be a 'true' LO. It is argued that if organization members do not know where they want to go or do not have a common idea of the organization's reason for being<sup>2</sup> collective learning will not emerge. Without a mutual comprehension of organization direction every individual might learn about his own task and job but the organization will not be capable of benefiting from that individual learning, because it will not implement the necessary mechanisms for generating, spreading and putting into practice new collective learning. 'Shared vision' takes time to materialize because requires continuous dialogue where organization members do not be afraid of expressing their ideas (Senge, 1990). LO leaders must promote, then, an open environment in order to build a common understanding of what is wanted to be accomplished and therefore, to generate focused learning. The difference between current reality and the common aspiration for the future is what serves as a power engine for learning and change. This is the principle of 'creative tension' that informs Senge's LO theory (1990).

Likewise, the idea of continuous learning must be, in my opinion, part of this common vision, as a *leit motiv* of the organization. This is the only way to avoid current and urgent organization work blocking continuous reflection on improving the organization. This common vision acts as a guide for organization members when they combine their efforts in order to learn what is necessary to reach that shared final goal. It helps to articulate the ethics of the LO in a coherent framework.

The individual involved in a LO is an individual who is always reflecting about his professional development<sup>3</sup>, his work, the organization (internal and externally) and how his job can be

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<sup>2</sup> I have to point out that individual learning exists in every kind of organization though there is not a common vision. But organizational learning is only possible if a common aspiration links people's work.

<sup>3</sup> What Senge called 'personal mastery' (Senge,1990).

improved to help the organization reach its objectives. It is a 'self-reflective' and 'organization reflective' subject. He is not only doing his tasks but also thinking about how the current way of doing things in his job and the organization can be modified and made better in order to adapt them to changes in the environment (adaptation - 'adaptive learning') or with the intention of transforming the environment itself (innovation - 'innovative learning') (Senge,1990). It would be what Gareth Morgan, when explaining the cybernetics model and the metaphor of the organization as a brain, called the capacity "to scan and anticipate change in the wider environment to detect significant variations" and "to develop an ability to question, challenge, and change operating norms and assumptions" (Morgan (1997:90)). As Senge pointed out, adaptive learning can emerge even if there is not a vision, but generative learning, the characteristic learning of LO, can only take place when people share a common idea of what they want to reach and accomplish (1990).

In this model the concept of reflection includes different features proposed by 'learning organization' authors that, in my opinion, are connatural to the self-reflective style: deep inquiry and questioning (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Argyris, 1996) and looking outside and inside the organization (Garra, 1987; Pedler et al., 1989), constantly providing and receiving feedback from other members of the organization (Senge, 1990; Bennett & O'Brien, 1994). Organizational inquiry is essential first, to correct a mistake by modifying action<sup>4</sup> and second, to question and challenge the values, action strategies and assumptions embedded in individuals and the organization.<sup>5</sup> Both types of learning are crucial in a LO although the second one is the one that has been commonly identified as essential for this model.

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<sup>4</sup> What Argyris & Schön defined as the 'single-loop learning' (Argyris & Schön, 1978,1996).

<sup>5</sup> To question and challenge the so-called 'theory in use' is the essential characteristic of the 'double-loop learning' suggested by Argyris & Schön (1978, 1996).

This reflection and inquiry would be useless if there was no real participation. All members of the organization must have the possibility to participate at all levels of the organization through dialogue and discussion (Senge, 1990). They must be allowed to propose new initiatives and solutions in every work process stage and organization echelon, and putting them into practice, allowing experimentation (Goh & Richards, 1997; Kelleher, 2004). But people will only engage themselves in participation if they feel their ideas will be listened, respected and implemented if possible. When these ideas cannot be executed for whatever reasons, employees should receive a coherent and clear explanation of why their ideas can not be realized as suggested. This is the only way of obtaining genuine participation from workers. People cannot be authentically committed, they cannot internalize the idea of the organization (Handy, 1993), if what is called participation in the organization is a 'fake' participation - a simulacrum of partaking- when people talk but are not really listened to. This simulation of participation is a barrier for learning, because it creates frustration and reluctance in people, blocking the wish of being an active part in the organization. As Coopey & Burgoyne say, people need space within organizations where they can learn but "people are denied space in which they can take risks in improvising aspects of self and social relationship whenever they have few opportunities to make useful contributions to decisions that affect them." (Coopey & Burgoyne (2000:876)).

But for authentic and useful participation people have to have easy and continuous access to internal and external information about the organization and about their job, through different and multiple ways. Simultaneously organization members have to be prepared to share information and knowledge with other members. This is what I have called 'continuous sharing of knowledge'. This attitude must inform the behaviour of organization individuals and systems. Information technology and knowledge management systems must support this spirit of sharing, but they are not the pillars of the LO. They are mere tools to facilitate this mind-set, this way of thinking. These systems must assist the flow of both tacit (knowledge of praxis) and explicit knowledge (theory and express data) inside the organization (Jensen, 2005).

Reflection, participation and sharing of knowledge need an open and trusting environment to take place in order to generate learning, according to LO advocates. And those concepts, openness and trust, are exactly two of most discussed and criticized issues in those authors who promote the utopian character of most of LO literature (Coopey, 1998). It is argued that this literature promises a paradise of goodness and good faith in organizations that is completely non-realistic and incompatible with real human behaviour. It is claimed that this literature does not deal with common power struggles, politics and conflict in organizations (LaPalombara, 2001b)<sup>6</sup> and that these authors tend to avoid these problematic issues promising an idealistic and impossible environment at work.

Some of authors who support trust as a key value for 'learning organizations' describe the idea of trust from an operational point on view, focusing on promoting freedom of action and process decision at work as well as latter control of outcomes (Handy, 1993; Argyris and Schön, 1996). Others concentrate on the idea of reliance on another individual's words (Barker & Camarata, 1998; Kelleher, 2004), emphasizing an ethical and behavioral point of view. But both trends tend to consider that power struggles are barriers for learning and therefore, must be eliminated through the encouragement of a reliable environment. However, there are other authors who believe that power conflicts should be, on the contrary, instigated to stir up learning (LaPalombara, 2001).

I believe that it would be necessary to find a new definition of openness and trust that took into account power battles and politics inside the organization. It is clearly idealistic to think about an organization where power and politics do not exist. Therefore, it would be essential to come upon a concept that includes freedom of speaking one's mind (Senge, 1990) with political pressures (Coopey, 1998) and defensive routines used by workers to defend themselves from others in the organization (Argyris, 1999). I believe that the win-win theory, which

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion about the learning organization as a Foucauldian gloom or Utopian sunshine, see Driver (1998).

considers that all participants in any process should be winners, could be a way to ease up these opposite strains. This theory proposes that, in order to find the best and most convenient solution for all participants in any process, the problem has to be separated from the people involved in it, the focus has to be on interests and not positions and everybody has to try to find an alternative for mutual profit, continuously using objective criteria (Fisher & Ury, 1983 quoted in Boehm & Ross, 1989). This approach fits perfectly to LO basis. I believe that this feeling of collective gain would promote individual and shared learning. The frustration that accompanies feelings of losing can block the desire of improvement and knowledge sharing between members of the organization. Win-win spirit minimizes these feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment.