

# CONCEPTS & CONNECTIONS:

— Learning Organizations —

*A Newsletter for Leadership Educators*

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## Learning and Leading: A Shift in Thinking for Higher Education

*by Wynn Rosser, Ph.D. and Laurie Thorp, M.S.*

As you view your life, what has been your most meaningful learning experience? How would you describe that experience? What was the context? Who was there? How did you feel? If you are like our students, this experience did not occur in a formal classroom setting. More than likely,

it involved someone you were close to — a relative or friend — someone with whom you felt safe. The setting was non-threatening — you were free to fail and take risks.

Now, examine your organizational context. Are these “ideal” conditions for meaningful learning present? Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* and leading authority on learning organizations, posits that many organizations today have “learning disabilities.” We don’t share information; we don’t look at the big picture; we don’t take the long view; we think in parts, not wholes; and, it isn’t safe to fail or take risks. As a result of these learning disabilities, Senge and his research team at MIT developed the five disciplines of learning organizations to help managers and leaders transform their organizations from where they are now to where they want to be. The transformation occurs through the use of systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

Senge (1990) defines a learning organization as an “...organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). The cornerstone of learning organizations is systems thinking. Systems thinking is the discipline for seeing wholes. It allows us to see interrelationships and patterns rather than singular events. How often do leaders focus on short-term events rather than looking at the underlying structure?

The second discipline is personal mastery. Organizations learn only when individuals learn. Thus, it is incumbent upon leaders to create conditions for personal growth and learning. Senge (1990) says, “people with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek” (p. 141). Mental models, the third discipline, are “...deeply held images of how the world

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# Connections From The Director

As I reviewed the work of each of our five authors in this edition of *Concepts and Connections*, I felt a sense of inspiration that learning organizations are not simply an abstract, academic exercise for the times, but an engaging, productive process. Each article in this issue clearly and thoughtfully defines various aspects and applications of the learning organization model.

For me to truly grasp the concept of this issue, I needed to examine myself as a critical thinker. Do I engage in a continual process of creating and re-creating my world? Do I challenge myself not to accept the notion that because things are the way they are now, they must always be that way? Do I accept that I do not hold the ultimate answers to life's issues? One certainty is that those things in which I believe, and the actions I take arising out of those things I believe, spring from a process of careful analysis and testing against reality — critical thinking.

The arrival of the learning organization marks the progress of leaders to think critically — “outside the box” — and to take risks. I have felt a positive flow of energy among student groups that embrace the shift from a top down model to a human potential orientation. I have observed groups flourish when members strive to understand their individual values and ultimately those of the organization. As educators, we can create a rich learning community through meaningful exploration of organizational purpose and vision; values and beliefs; goals and objectives; as well as the

expectations and points of view of all persons affected.

At a team-building retreat in rural Maryland last month, 30 University of Maryland student government leaders experienced some of the fundamental principles of a learning organization. They participated in structured experiences which unmasked individual values and transformed peer groups into cooperative learning laboratories. They also re-acquainted themselves with the stated purpose of their organization and their relationship with the broader campus community. Most of the participants found that by the end of the weekend, they were divorced from the idea that “this is the way we have always done it, so this is the way it must be.” I observed a shift in their capacity to create new and “expansive patterns of thinking” and practice. This was especially evident when they realized that their reason for being was not just to serve their own organizational needs, but to serve the broader needs of their constituents.

Leadership Development programming in the University setting is broad in scope, and often fragmented among the many administrative and academic divisions. When navigating through the complex maze of this thing referred to as a “comprehensive leadership development program”, I find that one of the greatest challenges is creating a sense of connectedness across all divisions and departments. Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, states quite clearly, “At the

heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind — from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world” (p.12). How do we institutionally weave an interconnected web and build programs that are truly comprehensive and connected by an over-arching mission and shared set of core values or beliefs? The challenge is to bring the stakeholders and shareholders to the dialogue. Once achieved, encouraging them to suspend ownership of ideas and entrusting that the group will shape them into better ideas than any one person could have created. This shared dialogue should enable stakeholders and shareholders the opportunity to continually clarify vision and mission, reminding them that involvement in the creation and clarification of vision and mission builds commitment. Trusting the process will guide the participants in the creation of an accurate picture of where the group has been and where they are now. A sustained “creative tension” will then inspire organizational learning and movement away from the status quo and territorial boundaries.

We must not accept the idea that because some might suggest that there is a crisis in leadership, that this must always be. By applying the disciplines of a learning organization we can continue to grow in the study, teaching and practice of civic, servant and political leadership — knowing that it is open to our positive influence.



Craig Slack, Director

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Senge, P. M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.

*“As educators, we can create a rich learning community through meaningful exploration of organizational purpose and vision; values and beliefs; goals and objectives; as well as the expectations and points of view of all persons affected.”*

## Learning and Leading: A Shift in Thinking for Higher Education

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works" (Senge, 1990, p. 174). They are the stories we tell ourselves over and over. While they are ever-present, they are almost never examined. Mental models impede learning; they keep us from being innovative and from seeing future possibilities. The fourth discipline, shared vision, provides the focus and energy for learning in our organizations. Vision has become an overused term in leadership, and many times the vision is a product of only one person's dreams resulting in compliance not commitment. In a learning organization, the vision is shared—one that represents the collective aspirations of all stakeholders. The final discipline, team learning, involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion. Leaders should seek to create an environment where many opinions are heard — where conflict is not avoided, but explored. Effective dialogue is a tool where individuals suspend their assumptions and no one is trying to win. David Bohm explains, "dialogue . . . is a free flow of meaning between people . . ." (cited in Senge, 1990, p. 240).

### **NCLP STAFF:**

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*This newsletter  
is printed on  
recycled paper.*

## Learning Organizations in Higher Education

As educators who are engaged in facilitating learning, what does this mean to us? Are we creating environments for real learning on our campuses? What are the implications for the larger system of higher education and the classroom? Are we preparing our graduates for a world of uncertainty where continual learning will be requisite? Our observations lead us to believe that most college campuses are modeling an outmoded way of learning. We are fragmented; disciplines rarely communicate with each other and there are few rewards for interdisciplinary work. Students attend lecture courses where instructors know all. Correct answers are memorized, not discovered. Faculty members are in a constant state of advocacy — students are not encouraged to inquire, challenge, or innovate. This is often referred to as the "sit 'n' git" approach to learning. As one of our students shared with us, "The problem is, in college and high school it isn't about real learning; it's about learning the system. I've learned the system here; anyone can do this and get the grades you want and not have learned anything."

Within the broader system, at a closer level, what is happening in our own educational settings? Are we creating a "practice field," where students can inquire, think critically, learn from others, create, take risks, and grow? As leaders in educational leadership, this is our challenge.

In the spring of 1998, the authors—both leadership instructors at Texas A&M—accepted this challenge. The authors were dissatisfied with the teaching/learning environment in the typical classroom. Simultaneously, our college

was seeking curricular change for the 21st century. Together, this dissatisfaction and need for change acted as catalysts to begin designing a course that would bring together Senge's principles with the department's undergraduate leadership emphasis. "Leadership for Learning Organizations" was designed to provide students with an alternative way of learning in higher education.

*"Are we creating a 'practice field,' where students can inquire, think critically, learn from others, create, take risks, and grow? As leaders in educational leadership, this is our challenge."*

Our intention was to model a learning organization in the classroom. How could we teach about this new way of knowing from behind a lectern? The typical memorization and regurgitation approach would not be appropriate. Therefore, one objective was to provide the students a practice field for leading a learning organization in the classroom. A second objective was to evaluate our university home — Texas A&M University — as a learning organization. To accomplish these objectives, we included an interdisciplinary faculty of four subject matter experts in the areas of systems thinking, shared visioning, team learning, and naturalistic inquiry. Although these "experts" were included in the course,

students were responsible for leading dialogues related to each of the five disciplines. The discussions were based on readings from the sole text for the course, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (1994). We recommend this text to anyone who is interested in the concept of learning organizations. It is a very user-friendly, 600 page volume filled with activities, case studies, recommended resources, and stories from guest contributors. It was our hope that learning would occur in the context of a conversation about the readings, rather than a lecture. Activities were selected from the Fieldbook to complement that week's topic. Some were more suc-

cessful than others. We leave it to the individual reader to choose activities appropriate for the format of their course or environment. Standard grading was replaced with a corporate model of performance evaluation. Peer and self-evaluations were emphasized. Course instructors were but one of many sources of feedback.

Overall, our first experience with teaching leadership for learning organizations was a success. The course will be offered again in a redesigned format in the fall of 1998. Many lessons were learned during the first iteration. Based on our experience, the following conclusions are offered as suggestions for anyone attempting to design a similar course.

- Our first conclusion is that 12 years of schooling cannot be undone in one semester. This sort of transformation takes time. Hence, the second iteration of this course has been designed around a two-semester format. The expanded format will afford students the time to build a working knowledge and common language and understanding so necessary to begin the transformational process.
- Secondly, the early stage of transformation will be uncom-

fortable — it is a part of the process. Sometimes it is agonizingly painful! We did not move out of the “uncomfortable phase” by semester’s end. The ambiguity and lack of structure as perceived by the students caused much of the discomfort.

Learning organizations by nature are emergent by design — there is no pre-programming. However, as requested by the students, the first semester will be a more structured experience. Changes will include a more detailed syllabus, periodic testing, and reflective papers.

- Finally, we were operating in a larger educational system that was not playing by the same rules. Students’ other courses requiring papers, projects, and exam study time took precedent over our simple request for mindful presence in the classroom. Thus, until students begin to embrace shared responsibility for learning —

which may not occur until the second semester — there will be greater emphasis on grading and attendance in the new course.

Implementing the five disciplines upon which learning organizations are based cannot be pre-programmed. The five disciplines are a way of life; they are a philosophy, a world view. They are a process, an attitude, a methodology. Becoming a learning organization cannot be done piecemeal. It requires a full shift in thinking. It begins with the individual and moves outward in concentric circles. Each person must choose to operate within this new world view—it cannot be mandated. The transformation is not a

“flavor of the month” program; rather, it must be sustained. Senge emphasizes that the process can be started from many places — with any discipline. It is not formulaic.

Having said that, there are several points of departure we suggest as suitable for higher education.

*“Becoming a learning organization cannot be done piecemeal. It requires a full shift in thinking.”*

## The LeaderShape Institute: Scholarship and Tuition Information for 1999

**LEADERSHAPE**

*The LeaderShape Institute, a six-day intensive leadership program is offering a 1999 scholarship grant opportunity for colleges and universities interested in bringing The Institute to their campuses in 2000. Scholarship grants will be given to institutions which send ten or more students to the “national” site at Allerton in central Illinois. These students would act as a “delegation” to report back to administrators and other students at their institution on the value of the experience. Total tuition for ten students: \$13,500 (\$1,350 per student); Scholarship funding of \$6,000 per institution. Each institution will be responsible for the remaining \$7,500. For additional information, contact Paula Spears (pspears@leadershape.org) or Bob Baney (bbaney@leadershape.org) at LeaderShape, Inc., 217/351-6200.*

Strategic planning is a natural place to begin the transformation. The learning organization philosophy includes all stakeholders and creates a venue where multiple voices can be heard — a must for successful strategic planning. Faculty and staff development present ideal opportunities for personal mastery — the starting point for transformation. The systems approach to problem solving is a beneficial approach to framing complex issues and addressing root cause as opposed to symptoms. Interdisciplinary curriculum development could be facilitated within the bounds of a learning organization. These ideas are just a sampling from an endless list of possibilities. In the end, it is up to the organization to find its own way on this journey.

We began this article by asking powerful questions. We would like to end it by again honoring the power of questions. John, a student in our learning organization course, posed the following question to us during an interview: "...like, I was thinking, what would happen if we did this in my organic chemistry class?" We responded by asking him, "What do you think would happen?" John replied, "I'd learn a lot better." We ask you, what would happen if you began this transformational process of leading and learning in your organization? 🏠

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# UPCOMING CONFERENCES

## Navigating the Future: Servant-Leadership and Community Leadership in the 21st Century

*A special joint conference brought to you by  
The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership and  
The National Association for Community Leadership*

June 10-13, 1999

Indianapolis, Indiana

Keynote Speakers:

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Joseph Jaworski

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*For more information call 317-259-1241*



## Fourth Leadership Conference

*Organized by National Resource Center for  
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University of South Carolina

### Leadership Education...

### Across the Campus and Beyond

April 9-11, 1999

Arlington, VA

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# UPCOMING CONFERENCES

# Leadership Training Concepts & Techniques

## *The After Action Review*

by Colonel John O'Shea

Much has been written about a process used in the Army called the After Action Review (AAR). Recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Fast Company* as well as a Harvard Business School videotape have lauded the AAR as an exceptionally effective technique for organizational learning. While it may appear paradoxical that the Army would embrace an egalitarian concept such as organizational learning, it has, in fact, used the process for more than 20 years. Indeed, some researchers attribute the Army's remarkable

improvement since the mid 1970's to the use of the AAR.

What, then, is an AAR and how does it contribute to organizational learning and effectiveness? The After Action Review, a technique of learning after doing, consists of three discrete components: a clear concept of what must be done, a thorough understanding of what happened, and an analysis of what could have been done to improve the outcome. This simple process is neither new nor is it revolutionary. One of the earliest uses of an AAR occurred more than 70 years ago, although it was not described as such.

In an article appearing in the magazine *Leader to Leader*, Peter Drucker described his early work experience under a boss who had one of the most significant influences upon his work ethic. The boss, editor of a daily newspaper in Frankfurt, was a tough taskmaster, requiring almost a Herculean effort from his subordinates. But, as Peter Drucker described, on the fourth Saturday of every month, this boss would gather his editorial staff at a local tavern to talk about their work. He would ask each person to describe what happened, what didn't happen, and what could be done to improve performance. He then followed with his own analysis of their performance using the same format. As Peter Drucker said: "We just loved it – and learned everything there was to know about where we stood and how to do better."

*"To begin the process, there must be a clear and unambiguous goal that is understood by all and against which performance can be objectively measured."*

Peter Drucker's description of these monthly meetings shows a very strong correlation with the Army's use of an AAR – yet his experience took place in the 1920's and there is no evidence of a similar process elsewhere until the Army's use of it in the mid 1970's. If the process is so effective, why did it take more than 50 years for any organization to adopt it? The answer may be that a fundamental shift in organizational culture must first occur to allow the process to take hold and develop. That cultural shift must allow for honest reflection on collective and individual performance with full participation

by all members of the organization.

For the Army, the introduction of the AAR was the result of an evolution of techniques designed to improve Army training and raise the organization from its post-Viet Nam malaise. The evolution began with a collective acknowledgment by senior leaders that things had to change and those changes had to begin with honest and candid appraisals of training performance. With veracity came the ability to adjust the approach to training where true organizational learning could take place and the AAR process could develop.

The process is effective for the Army but became so only after a cultural shift. Through that shift, the Army was willing to examine performance collectively, across all ranks — where its leaders and subordinates alike were willing to discuss, candidly and professionally,

## NEW Books...

*The Handbook of Leadership Development, by the Center for Creative Leadership, is now available. Editors include Cynthia D. McCauley, Russell S. Moxley, Ellen Van Velsor, and CCL Associates. Packed with practical, cutting-edge advice, this guide features the Center's acclaimed Leadership Development Model. The book is available at bookstores, by calling Jossey-Bass at 800-956-7739, or on the web at [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).*

their unit's performance and where there was a willingness to capture the learning for subsequent retrieval. Can it be adopted by organizations outside the Army? My work with Fortune 100 Companies says it can, but only if senior management and the entire organization are willing to fully embrace its principles of full and honest analysis of performance.

To begin the process, there must be a clear and unambiguous goal that is understood by all and against which performance can be objectively measured. For business, the goal could be meeting targeted

quarterly financial results, manufacturing a product with a minimum quality rejection rate, or, in a non-profit, achieving a certain donor participation level. While any goal can be established, it should be achievable over the short term and be subject to objective scrutiny. Soon after the event, the members of the team responsible for working toward the goal should examine the outcome. When shortfalls are identified, the entire unit – boss and subordinates – should discuss how performance can be improved.

One crucible for organizational learning in the Army is the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, where simulated tank warfare is conducted on a grand scale. Before each training event, soldiers are given a clear mission statement complete with standards and conditions of performance. Following the training event, which may last for 30 minutes or several hours, the entire organization will conduct a formal analysis – an AAR – of their performance. It is during this process, with the full participation of leader and subordinates, that techniques for performance improvement are discovered and learned.

The post-event analysis is critical to the effectiveness of an AAR. Unless all elements of performance are examined, including decisions made by the leader, the AAR will not be effective. When the discussion is open and explores all elements of performance, then real learning follows from the ensuing dialogue. Clearly the approach will

be difficult at first. But the Army, well-known for its hierarchical structure, adapted the method and in turn transformed itself from a less than effective organization to the world's preeminent fighting force that achieved stunning victory in the Persian Gulf and continued its record of excellence by restoring peace in Bosnia.

Can your organization adapt the process overnight? It is unlikely. But those organizations with a reduced hierarchy and a management style characterized by consensus building may move more quickly than those organizations with an entrenched bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the AAR has the potential to tap the collective talent of any organization and, in turn, allow that organization to achieve extraordinary gains. ■

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*Colonel John O'Shea is Director of the Army's Strategic Outreach Program at the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. An Infantry officer and military strategist, Colonel O'Shea holds a Master of Science in Marine Biology degree and a Master of Business Administration degree. His current research interest is the role of leadership in organizational transformation, a subject he examines in collaboration with Fortune 100 corporations as part of the Army's outreach to business and industry.*

## Fourth Annual International Symposium

*The Fourth Annual International Symposium will take place at the*

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**Topics include:**

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*Global Trends in Higher Education*

*Student Affairs Leadership Around the World*

*Cross-Cultural Understanding and Tolerance.*

**For further information, contact NASPA at [www.naspa.org](http://www.naspa.org) or 202-265-7500.**

## W E B W A T C H

**Here are some web sites that provide information about Learning Organizations:**

**Learning Organizations – a Web Bibliography**  
<http://ads-sun2.ucsc.edu/learnorg.html>

**Learning Communities, Learning Organizations, Learning Colleges**  
[http://www.innovating.com/page\\_19.html](http://www.innovating.com/page_19.html)

**The Society for Organizational Learning**  
<http://www.sol-ne.org>

# Chaordic™ Organizations:

*An Interview with Larry Yee*

*By Dawn Kastanek*

“How confident are you that the organization or institution to which you belong is fully capable and has the capacity to deal with the increasingly complex social, economic, environmental, educational, cultural, and technological problems and challenges of the 21st century?” This question was posed by Larry Yee at the Association for Leadership Educators Annual Conference in July 1998. According to Yee, it is our institutions’ inability to adapt to rapid change and increasing complexity that has resulted in “...schools that can not teach; welfare systems in which no one fares well; judicial systems without justice; unhealthy health-care systems; and economies that can not economize”. In order to begin to explore how organizations might change to adapt to our increasingly complex society, the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs contacted Mr. Yee to engage in a dialogue about his involvement with one movement that is addressing this question.

Dee Hock, Founder and CEO Emeritus of VISA International, introduced Yee to the notion of the chaordic™ organization. VISA’s exceptional success can be largely attributed to its organizational purpose, principles, and innovative structure. This structure was later dubbed “chaordic™” by Hock, who coined the term to describe new types of organizations that are “self-organizing, adaptive, nonlinear, complex, and whose behavior harmoniously blends characteristics of both order and chaos”(cited in Yee, 1998). Hock believed that it was important to create a new word because language strongly influences the way we think and new thinking is required to create new forms of organization. According to Yee (1998), “complexity science tells us that life, evolution, change, growth, and development all happen at that balance point between chaos and order.” In 1995, Yee took a sabbatical leave and spent a year

working with Dee Hock. Hock was beginning to work with groups all over the country to assist them in exploring, creating, and designing chaordic™ organizations. Currently, Hock is wholly committed to applying chaordic™ ideas and concepts to large-scale institutional change in a variety of areas and applications around the world.

During his sabbatical, Yee became involved in a project to re-conceive Peter Senge’s Organizational Learning Center at MIT. Senge’s successful book, *The Fifth Discipline*, inspired the creation of this research center, which was supported by several of the largest and most successful corporations in the US, including Ford, Shell, and Chrysler. The philosophy of the OLC was that “...by improving the institutional learning process, they could accelerate innovation and enhance effectiveness, not to mention better adapt and thrive in an increasingly changing and complex world” (Yee, 1998). Eventually there was concern that the practices of the center were not necessarily consistent with the values they espoused and that the existing structure was not allowing them to grow and expand. Hock helped Senge and his design team to completely re-structure the OLC to be in harmony with its purpose and principles. Although this effort was a success, it demonstrated to Yee that fundamental change is extremely difficult because of the way it can threaten traditional power structures and deeply ingrained organizational cultures.

When pointing out the importance of changing the way we think about organizations, Yee emphasizes that our rate of change, diversity, interconnectedness, and complexity are increasing at a dizzying pace. Chaordic™ thinking offers a new paradigm that would allow us to be in closer step with this new environment and to balance the oftentimes paradoxical forces we experience. A chaordic™ organization distributes power more equitably. There is greater balance between centralized and decentralized power, hierarchy and no hierarchy, competition and cooperation.

A chaordic™ organization can handle immense diversity because of its unity around purpose and principles. According to Yee, “...it is how nature is organized. Nature offers many examples of chaords™. Look at how our brains are organized, or our bodies, for that matter. Look at a tree or an entire forest. All these natural systems are self-organizing, self-regulating, adaptive, and non-linear. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and yet, embedded in each part is the capacity to create the whole. There are re-occurring patterns, similarities, yet no exact copies. For instance, on a tree, there are no two leaves exactly alike, yet there is a pattern repeated over and over. Diversity and unity.” The configuration of relationships determines the system’s essential characteristics. Thus, hierarchical organizations are described largely by using machine metaphors. Chaordic™ organiza-

*“When pointing out the importance of changing the way we think about organizations, Yee emphasizes that our rate of change, diversity, interconnectedness, and complexity are increasing at a dizzying pace.”*

tions are best described through biological metaphors.

Yee tells us that Dee Hock has designed a six-stage process for groups that wish to re-conceive themselves chaordically™. The process requires enormous discipline and commitment. As a person/group works through the process, there are difficult changes in mindset and culture. (For a description of this six-stage process, contact the Chaordic™ Alliance, whose web site is listed at the end of this article.)

### *The Challenge for Leaders*

When we asked him about the role of leaders in this process, Mr. Yee asserted that leadership is crucial if organizations are to transform. Leaders need to listen carefully to the people in their organizations and to understand ways to un-freeze old ways of thinking and antiquated cultural patterns. According to Yee, *The Tao of Leadership* by Heider presents a description of the kind of leadership that is being called for in the new age.

## The Chaordic™ Alliance

*If you would like to learn more about the Chaordic™ Alliance, visit their web site at [www.chaord.org](http://www.chaord.org). There you will find a brief history of the development of the Chaordic™ Alliance, a Chaordic™ Reading List that has been compiled by Dee Hock, as well as other pertinent publications and links.*

*"The responsibility of leadership, therefore, is creating and managing new models of organization that transcend our old paradigms."*

The NCLP also asked Yee about how leaders can practically create and manage new models of organization when faced with the intractable paradigms of old. Yee responded that it might be too difficult to change the old organizations — it might be better to create new ones that the old can transcend and join. VISA is one example of a corporation that has done this successfully. At first, the creators of VISA were hoping to transform the banking industry, but this became too daunting. VISA was then conceived as a separate institution to which traditional financial institutions could belong.

In a 1998 speech, Yee concluded that "Until we fundamentally change the structure of our organizations and institutions and re-conceive their very essence, it is no longer possible to have optimal conditions for highly effective individual or organizational learning. The responsibility of leadership, therefore, is creating and managing new models of organization that transcend our old paradigms." ■

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*Dawn Kastanek is the Editor of Concepts and Connections and the Coordinator of the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. Dawn is pursuing a Ph.D. in Human Development at the University of Maryland, College Park.*

## CALL FOR PAPERS

*The Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society announces a call for papers for publication in "Diverse Families: A Dialogue about Reflective Practice". Reflective human action is a nonpositional leadership perspective which features the principles of accepting chaos, sharing information, developing relationships, and embracing vision. Manuscripts are due January 15, 1999. For more information, contact: Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society 4990 Northwind Drive, Suite 140 East Lansing MI 48823-5031 Telephone: (517) 351-8335 [dmitstifer@kon.org](mailto:dmitstifer@kon.org)*

# A View of Student Organizations Within Higher Education Institutions: *The Campus as a Catalyst for Organizational Learning*

by Phillip Jutras

**“W**e are leaving the age of structured organizations and moving into an era where the ability to understand, facilitate, and encourage processes of self-organization will become a key competence” (Morgan, 1993, p. 93).

A learning organization is an institution in which people at all levels are collectively, continually enhancing their capacity and the organization’s capacity to secure meaning in order to create what they really believe in. Higher-education institutions are generally effective at getting students to collect and recall information and solve problems. The process of self-learning is less clearly defined, however, and the student often perceives that he or she is dependent on receiving knowledge and seldom contributing new learning or arranging it on his own. What counts for the formal curriculum in colleges and universities is drawn up in the course syllabi and is played out in rectangular shaped rooms. This continues to constitute the expected boundaries of formal learning. At the informal level, the behavioral patterns of students, staff, faculty and administrators in their day-to-day interactions constitute what some refer to as the “hidden curriculum,” which is influenced by student culture, norms and traditions.

The student organizations that define much of the hidden curriculum include clubs, intramural, academic and multi-cultural groups, and recreational, cultural and political campus-based organizations. Aside from meeting new people and running activities, do these forums offer a venue for organizational learning? As established institutionalized groups of clients, the student organizations may represent a logical mechanism for the college to see learning carried out

actively, informally, and applied in a safe campus setting. Reciprocally, the norms, goals and activities of these collective student groups should influence and be a source of the college’s organizational learning. Students’ needs, interests, and even indifference are reflected both by which activities motivate them as well as by those which they avoid. Institutions bent on learning, not just instilling knowledge, work at creating many mechanisms for receiving these signals.

Campus organizations continue to be a rich source of informal leadership development for undergraduates. The development of student leadership skills is a growing priority for colleges that support these groups. The dynamics of how these student groups form, change over time, and respond to other constituencies on and off campus is becoming more complex as the environment of higher education takes on many of the characteristics of the general society. The degree to which the university leadership and infrastructure influences and educates student leading and learning contributes to building a collective capacity for influence, collaboration, risk-taking, and constructive change. Generally, institutions espouse such lofty goals for students, yet it is often the perception of students that the actions of educators may not always be consistent with the original intent. This inconsistency may serve to undermine trust for student participants in clubs, campus government, and community service. It is also

an opportunity for students to clarify their own sense of purpose and learn to influence upward and across the organization, to exercise perseverance, consistent action, and to engage the university at the essential points of the informal hidden curriculum. This

balancing force of student organizations and their commitment can act to produce new learning and adaptation on the part of the institution, a place of learning for students as well as faculty and administration. The capacity to listen, respond, and adapt is at the heart of how organizations learn. As the environment changes, the capacity to adapt increases.

The role of servant leadership deals with the practical and ethical uses of power to bring about beneficial results. Servant leadership can be interpreted as a form

of gradual change brought about by individual and collective efforts to mobilize others. Servant leadership is a process whose core characteristics include awareness, empathy, foresight and community building. Creating community is at the heart of what many college organizations strive to attain. Community building goes beyond the formal structure of campus committees and clubs. Its boundaries are open, its culture is inclusive, and it stimulates internal commitment to achieve an improved end state (Spears, 1995).

## **Barriers to Learning**

What prevents the process of change and adaptation from

*“As established institutionalized groups of clients, the student organizations may represent a logical mechanism for the college to see learning carried out actively, informally, and applied in a safe campus setting.”*

being a more common occurrence on college campuses? Within the context of student groups, some common tendencies impede learning and organizational adaptation.

- **Differentiating and Fragmenting Roles.** The use of labels — such as student majors, freshman, sophomore, commuter, resident — while descriptive, also acts to separate subgroups and establish artificial boundaries between people of common interests.
- **Compliance vs. Commitment.** We build and work for commitment around purpose and involvement, yet we often settle for obligatory attendance and routine participation.
- **Blaming vs. Learning.** Students become frustrated with the lack of involvement or attendance at functions and their response often leads to sealing off and isolating other students. Further, this lack of participation results in student leaders pointing blame at the administration and making attributions about the institution based on very little data. Blaming cuts off information and does not enable us to look at the source of the problem (Senge, 1990).
- **Proactive vs. Reflective.** While action is important to mobilize and sustain student interest, taking action without purpose or a plan blurs the group's reason for being and can reduce commitment in the long run. Thinking and reflecting on a situation and the resources needed can build a group's capacity and solidarity.
- **Activity Driven.** An extension of Proactive is the desire to create activities, such as fund-raising, winter carnival, Oktoberfest, tournaments, and community service. When activities define the group, the purpose is inherently changing and ambiguous to its members. Purpose and direction give life to activities; the reverse, however, is a common reality among student groups.

### *Elements of Reconstructing Institutions of Learning as Learning Organizations*

To turn the institution on its head would place the student at the center of the learning organization. The student as primary client would learn to influence upward and across the institution because she learns to interpret, understand, and interface with the primary subcultures that exist in every college (Schein, 1997). To interact effectively between subcultures requires divergent thinking and the ability to interact assertively and diplomatically.

1. **Seeing the parts versus the whole in perspective.** A fundamental aspect of learners and leaders is the ability to get on the balcony and see the relationship of the parts to the whole. On campus, for example, the impact of budget constraints creates a dilemma for administrators in making choices between varsity athletics versus intramural or co-curricular activities (Heifitz and Laurie, 1997).
2. **Simplify the agenda, focus on a clear challenge, and create a sense of urgency among members.** Student organizations need to draw on the talents and resources of their members. Rather than generating a high volume of activity, a more selective approach simplifies and condenses the priorities of the group. This can result in crafting a desired set of results and then taking action that will move the group toward the results (Kotter, 1995).
3. **Read and understand differences in campus subcultures.** In dealing with other campus sub-units, student groups fare better when they are able to appreciate the other group's point of view. Negotiating between subcultures involves understanding the goals but also gaining awareness of the other group's culture and priorities. This organizational learning process helps reduce evaluation and attribution and increases understanding.

4. **Give the work to the student members rather than to the few who are in charge.** Student leaders can avoid a common fate of undergraduate groups wherein those in charge are also left to do most of the work. Engaging others starts with getting members involved in setting the priorities and then assessing their talents and interests. Ultimately, it can lead to letting members do the important work and receiving recognition for improvements. This is fundamental to the hidden curriculum. Students may discover that their collective work is bigger than the sum of its parts (Heifitz & Laurie, 1997).
5. **Create habits of constructive dialogue, remaining open to suggestions and new ideas.** Satisfying relations, a sense of accomplishment, and the quality of dialogue between members stimulates the vitality of student organizations. The ability to suspend judgment, to hear people out, and to evaluate differing ideas creates new learning opportunities for individuals and the group. This is an essential aspect of informal, applied learning (Argyris, 1994). The process of being accessible and not sealing the group off from others prepares members to interact with different institutional subcultures.
6. **Protect voices from below.** Student leaders need to insure that their constituents' voices are valued. Universities, in turn, need to protect and respect the voices of students in campus situations. Protecting voices from below means valuing students' contributions and ensuring they are a part of the dialogue which shapes institutional learning. In respecting student voices, student leaders consciously seek the ideas and energy of their classmates. This can ensure that — both within and outside of the classroom — each encounter and every interaction has the potential for broadening the dialogue. In this tension, amidst a more bal-

anced exchange, the college can enhance its capacity for learning. By protecting the voices from below, student leaders contribute to a more active and committed campus community.

In ancient Greece, Pericles urged the Athenians to create a unique community and culture, one that defined the potential of its people and raised aspirations. Pericles, like Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines, believed that this goal could best be attained when citizens are engaged in working hard as well as playing hard. Campus organizations often have both a service and social focus but are also an opportunity for pure enjoyment and relaxation. This contribution to student enjoyment is an essential source or forming relations and is an antidote to the stresses of undergraduate life.

We cannot create learning organizations that are totally absent of control and authority, but we can create the conditions that promote continuous learning and adaptation. Thinking of the institution as a system with connecting subcultures, leaders of student organizations can help influence the dialogue and the infrastructure in which organizational learning occurs. Student groups increase their potential to influence as they become coherent, committed teams. They become more adept at learning when they engage other parts of the university operations. Learning to navigate between internal subcultures and hierarchical levels is the mark of leaders and learners.

*"We cannot create learning organizations that are totally absent of control and authority, but we can create the conditions that promote continuous learning and adaptation. Thinking of the institution as a system with connecting subcultures, leaders of student organizations can help influence the dialogue and the infrastructure in which organizational learning occurs."*

Similarly, when the institution places the student at the top of the organization, it makes a statement about the importance and direction of how learning takes place within the university. Creating conditions and structures that elevate informal learning on campus is a way of shaping new thinking and building mental models. When faculty, administrators, and students see learning as reciprocal, the inspiration for new knowledge may come from many sources within the official and the hidden curricula. In this setting, leadership learning and the ideal of the servant leader can prosper. Pericles knew this long before formal institutions organized to teach future generations. In the complex world of higher education, the lessons are more deeply felt than ever.

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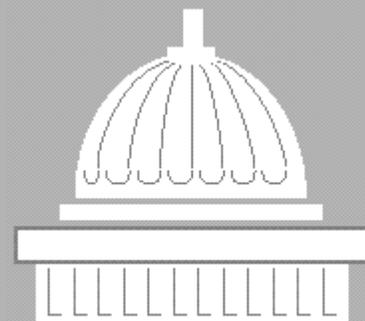
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# Scholarship and Research Updates

## Organizational Learning

By Susan R. Komives

The current campus emphasis on learning communities and learning organizations is encouraging and is a natural extension of considering ways to expand both individual capacity and collective capacity to address change. While useful to study the concept of learning organizations, it is perhaps best to focus on organizational learning. How does learning occur in an organization — what practices, processes, and systems are needed for people in an organization to learn together and expand their collective capacity? Other articles in this issue seek to address those questions. I encourage readers to think of both the socialization applications of new members learning about the organization as well as how the organization functions as a learning community.

Most applications of learning theory have been applied to individual learning. Grounded in various psychological fields, learning has been studied through such theoretical frames as neurophysiological (i.e., biological), behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist, and social learning. We know far less about how groups of people learn — particularly people in organizations or in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Tsang (1997) helps us understand that there are really two streams of writing that deal with organizational learning. One stream includes advice from consultants addressing how an organization should learn (see Senge, 1990; Watkins and Marsick, 1993) which Tsang suggests are often prescriptive — based less on research than on the consultant's experience and tend to over-generalize to all types of organizations. The second stream

seeks to address how organizations learn with rigorous research studies which, Tsang attests, often fall short of being useful in practice. There are actually few empirical studies of how organizations learn. Both streams seem to agree that organizational learning is comprised of at least two components: a cognitive component of how the systems in the organization support the members' ability to acquire or create knowledge and insight and the behavioral component of how the members

change processes and create new processes to change their behavior. Readers will find some new Senge work on the web at <<http://www.quality.org/tqmbbs/prin-pract/comcom.txt>>. I also recommend DiBella's and Nevis' (1998) most recent book on learning organizations.

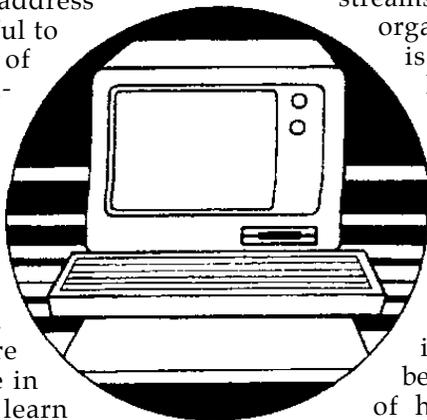
Most of us would be well served to revisit Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1981, 1984). Kolb helps us understand the cycle of creating new practices: concrete experience → reflection → abstract conceptualization → application. This cycle is a useful learning model for individuals as well as for groups or organizations. Kolb's Learning Style Inventory is a useful assessment measure for determining the various preferred styles in the organization. This information can enable

the group to focus on how it best learns. Kolb helps us frame how groups process and learn from their shared experiences.

Assessing such a complex phenomenon as organizational learning is difficult. I refer you to the 1996 *ASTD's Guide to Learning Organization Assessment Instruments*. While I was unable to review this publication, ASTD's work is credible and professional and this should be a fine source of instrumentation designed for training. Readers will also find some appealing organizational learning assessment instruments in Silberman's 1998 *Team and Organization Development Sourcebook*. As is often the case with these kinds of sourcebooks, no psychometrics

are reported. Instruments are accompanied by contact information for each author where, presumably, one can get that information. Most are designed for business organizations but many would be useful for student groups and include measures of how a group manages change, handles conflict, functions as a team, as well as how effective a group is as a learning organization.

Think about your student development educator role. We do well with individual-leader development, but we all likely do far less well with group-leadership development. How a group functions as a leadership community is often mysterious and receives far less attention and guidance. Studying organizational learning is the necessary theoretical foundation to expand-



*"I encourage readers to think of both the socialization applications of new members learning about the organization as well as how the organization functions as a learning community."*

ing our ability to help groups develop their collective capacity. ■

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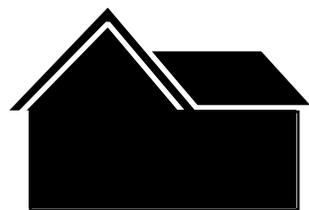
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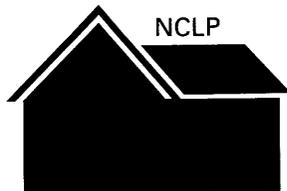
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