

Strategic Learning

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Strategic learning is a process of researching, interacting, talking, listening, reflecting and listening to each other until interpersonal understanding and organizational direction is achieved. I have spent all my life studying instances of learning that have strategic consequences for different kinds of organizations, where what was learned not only resided in some individuals but rather was encoded into the organization itself. This has led me to constantly answer the question about what an organization is. An organization is a set of interrelated variables- people, structure, processes, technology, resources, goals and objectives-that aim at making an impact within specific environments, niches or markets.

The life of any organization, including its learning venture, is determined by the patterns of organizing and interacting at work as they take place day in and day out. These patterns are maintained by the dialogues that take place and those that don't take place, and the meaning and purpose people construct out of their interactions.

If a team or an organization really learns and changes, the change is manifested in those patterns of interactions; otherwise after an organizational change process that did not change the pattern, people will say that nothing changed. By the way, knowledge management is about researching, creating and learning about the best practices and disseminating them all across the organizational system, the community and the society as a whole.

Strategy is the process of getting organized to make a high impact within the working market or environment. Learning is the acquisition and use of new knowledge that comes from an inquiry of some sort and makes a sustained high impact for individuals and for the organization. New knowledge that comes without inquiry is revelation, not learning. Learning requires use of the knowledge acquired for its effects to be sustained, even to be able to say that learning has taken place. Learning should be evident in the changes people experience from its use. Listen to what people say, observe what they do and you can easily establish what they really know.

Combining these working definitions of strategy, learning and organization allows the organizational designer to establish that organizational learning occurs when two or more people inquire in a way that results in new knowledge, alters their patterns of organizing, and results are achieved in a sustained manner. The logic is learning strategically or die!

Strategic learning is about having a different kind of dialogue. In this conversation, people and units take turns sharing their research, experiences, observations, thoughts, feelings and desires about some pattern of organizing that is unsatisfactory to one of them or to all. The capacity of listening with intensity to others is crucial for strategic learning to take place. The strategic dialogue is used to obtain deeper insight into their own reality, experience, knowledge-sets and grounded sense of the problems and opportunities facing the individuals and the organization. By doing so, people clear out interpersonal conflicts and dynamics, and replace them with a better sense of unity of purpose. Very often, this process of learning to interact with a real sense of civic virtue, reciprocity, mutuality and responsibility leads to a positive change in the relationship and the resolution of whatever problem motivated the strategic learning dialogue in the first place.

Inter-organizational learning happens when people from different organizations come together and share new knowledge to face the challenges in their organizational markets. Organizations have to provide research and learning spaces where people can participate in collaborative ventures. The learning space is critical in order to deploy a plan for collaborative action as a schedule of steps in the completion of a project and time allotted to each of them, and that serves as a road map for the team carrying out the project. The plan for collaborative action is created in a facilitative way by asking questions such as “What phases need to take place to complete the project?” “Who is responsible for each phase?” “Which stakeholder group needs to be involved at each phase?” and “How long do we need for each phase?”

Strategic learning is about celebrating a practical dialogue as an open-ended, nonlinear approach designed to help people arrive at effective solutions to task-oriented challenges. The condition of pluralistic social trust between individuals based on something they have in common (vision, mission, goals and objectives) is fundamental in order for a practical dialogue to take place.

In order for organizations to nourish strategic learning exercises, they have to cultivate a regime of mutual gain as a policy regime that achieves widespread lasting benefits at reasonable cost and that taps and serves people's deepest interests and desires for a better reality for themselves and those they care about. To the extent that this condition is achieved, and people really share values and assumptions that guide their behavior, at first they may have entered the organization as strangers but eventually will leave it as friends and as organizational family members.

Strategic learning is about relational quality that points to the degree to which relationships facilitate (not impede) collaboration and affect in a positive manner the sense of personal connectedness among participants. It can be characterized as having a dual nature of both process and outcome; in other words, strategic learning is to know what works and to take what is learned to make the necessary adjustments in enabling an organization to change as the result of the learning process.

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