

Learning Through the Quality of Discourse

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Charles Handy alerts, in *The Age of Unreason*, that organizational learning can be understood on three inter-related abilities: (1) Ability to comprehend internal and external reality. (2) The level related to the ability to recognize and understand the basic assumptions operating within the organization, and identify those assumptions that are congruent with reality and those that are not. (3) Ability to change the assumptions that need to be modified and to leave in place those that should remain.

As Handy also says, in *The Age of Paradox*, to build and sustain learning capacity is to maintain an active openness to new circumstances. It was John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* who instructed that **REAL LEARNING IS DISCOVERY AND DISCOVERY DOESN'T HAPPEN UNLESS YOU ARE LOOKING AND RESEARCHING**. So next time someone say to you that they know something, ask what they have researched and discovered.

Connected with discovery is the requirement to change assumptions and behavior when there is a need to do so, while sustaining the capacity to work with efficiency within a set of existing assumptions when such behavior produces the best results. But as we have shared, everything within organizations has to be aligned or reconciled with the purpose (reason to be) as a guiding rule for decision-making.

Harold Wilensky coined the term of organizational intelligence and forecast. In his extraordinary book, **Organizational Intelligence**, he says that to get good intelligence leaders have to beat the system. It doesn't matter what kind of a system, good intelligence depends upon extraformal sources that cut against whatever formal system the leader has got. Some gains in

the quality of intelligence are possible from re-designing the research and intelligent function; AND RE-CYCLING THINKING. BUT MUCH OF THE ORGANIZATION'S DEFENSE AGAINST INFORMATION PATHOLOGIES AND DISTORTIONS DEPEND ON THE LEADER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD KNOWLEDGE, WHICH IS A PRODUCT OF HIS OWN EDUCATION AND ORIENTATION, HIS EXPOSURE TO INDEPENDENT SOURCES, AND HIS CAPACITY TO BREAK THROUGH THE WALL OF CONVENTIONAL

A starting point to overcome any barrier to the intelligent organization is to begin at the level of basic interactions among the members of the organization. The nature and quality of information communicated among participants within the organization will determine the potential of the people to learn. Patterns of defensiveness, attribution and faulty perception and political gaming will bring about noise and distortion in the flow of information. Such patterns of communication will systematically mask the truth.

Without the ability to engage in communication that may be threatening and unsettling to some members of the organization, the aim of comprehending reality and its potential as fully as possible will be hopeless. Efforts to edify the intelligent organization are most appropriately applied, at least initially, while enhancing the ability of the organization to communicate within a standard of valid empirical information.

The core concept in transforming the quality of information communicated within an organization lies in understanding the linkage between cognition and the social context of work. THE KEY ENABLING-CHANGE FACTOR IS CONNECTED WITH UNDERSTANDING THE WAYS IN WHICH TAKEN-FOR GRANTED ASSUMPTIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE WAYS OF THINKING OF INDIVIDUALS, TEMAS AND ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS.

When a collection of individuals, through their ability to manage their own idiosyncratic perceptions and patterns of defensiveness (Irving Janis will say group think), can communicate effectively with each other, a precondition to learning will have been met. Fundamental constraints on collective creativity will have been mitigated and attention may turn to modes of collective thought, discovery, accurate perceptions of reality and higher quality solutions to problems.

If we are going to call ourselves educated as a society and as leaders of organizations, in multiple fields of knowledge, we have to show that we prepared to learn in a broader context and from each other.

Learning is related to what Zaffron and Logan call the three laws of performance:

1. How people perform correlates to how situation occurs to them.
2. How situation occurs to them arises in language.
3. Future based language (learning) transforms how situations occur to people.

The intellectual skills bestowed upon us by our education should be transferable to others. This process can be called teaching! If in the knowledge society we can learn almost anything we also have to learn the art of learning through the quality of our discourse.