

By Peter M. Senge

How Do You Know If Your Organization Is Learning?

Over the past year, since the publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, there has been a lot of activity and inquiry around the topic of how we can create learning organizations. One of the questions that many leaders ask is, "How do I know that learning is starting to occur in my organization as part of our daily activities?"

First of all, we shouldn't lose sight of the obvious: organizational learning has to do with improving performance. If a team is learning, we expect it to perform better. We wouldn't consider a basketball team that continues to perform below its potential—regardless of its intellectual sophistication—to be a learning team.

But gauging learning just by performance can be a trap. I think a common misconception these days is that organizational learning is synonymous with improving performance. People are saying, "if product development times, manufacturing cycle times, defect rates, etc. are getting better, then that organization is learning." But those figures can be misleading. A team or a company can do all the wrong things and get good performance for a short period of time. The employees may be taking short cuts that will kill them five years down the road in order to get those manufacturing cycle times down, or they can be improving one performance index by wreaking havoc in other parts of the organization. Likewise, a team or a company can be doing a lot of things right but the results won't show up for a while, either because of intrinsic delays or because there are forces outside their control that are depressing results.

Signs that organizational learning is occurring are a lot more subtle and harder to measure than performance indicators, primarily because we are not used to looking for them. The sort of things we are going to have to learn to

look for are a feeling of spirit and energy throughout the organization, and a sense of alignment. We will have to learn how to recognize an insightful, internally consistent diagnosis of a complex problem and a willingness among co-workers to continually test their favored diagnoses. People will start talking about their jobs differently. For example, you might ask someone "What are you doing?" and instead of rattling off their job description, they will refer to their sense of purpose, the

achieve that vision.

Along with this willingness to challenge thinking, there will also be an understanding of how to probe more effectively into other people's viewpoints. Conflict will take on a different meaning—it won't be a personal attack, pitting one person's opinion against another. Instead, it will be a joint inquiry into how those differing perspectives can be combined to form a deeper understanding of the problem or issue at hand. This type of


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customers they serve, and how their work interacts with others.

Another thing we would sense if an organization was learning is a difference in the quality of dialogue. There would be a real freedom among people to acknowledge what they don't know. An atmosphere of questioning and experimentation would exist at all levels of the organization. People would feel comfortable saying, "Here is where our thinking is right now and here is where we want to be," and would actively search out new ideas and input.

Perhaps surprisingly, there would also be a lot of conflict occurring in the organization. At Innovation Associates, we have often said that in highly aligned groups there is much conflict of ideas. People's alignment—their commonality of purpose—would give them the confidence to disagree in a way they normally wouldn't. As people become partners in creating a common vision, they will begin to feel a responsibility to challenge each other's thinking in order to gain deeper levels of understanding needed to

inquiry would show up in a conversation on the shop floor where one employee would say to another, "Oh, you don't see it the way I do? That's interesting. What leads you to see it differently?" Then we would start to see a greater balance between dialogues of inquiry and advocacy.

I think ultimately, the truest sign of a learning organization at work will be when people begin to enter into these dialogues of joint inquiry instead of always advocating their positions. Then we will begin to learn what never could have been learned individually—no matter how bright we are, no matter how much time we take, and no matter how committed we are. What couldn't be learned individually will become possible as a group. That will be organizational learning. 

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