

LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Learning is a process usually identified with individuals. It is a continuous life-long process of improving one's adaptiveness. How is this concept relevant for organizations? Peter Senge popularized this concept of learning organization during the 1990's. He belongs to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). MIT is known for developing deep insights into system dynamics right from the days of Jay W Forrester. According to Peter Senge learning organizations are:

“Organizations 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 to see the whole together.”

In situations of rapid change taking place in the business environment, incremental changes that are brought out by organizations do not stand up to the demands of such volatility. To survive and prosper in such conditions, it is absolutely essential for organizations to be flexible and adaptive. They must tap the commitment of the employees at all levels and also tap the learning potential of individuals at all levels. They should learn through the individuals who work for the organization. Adapting includes sensing the change in the environment, understanding the impact of such a change in the organization and responding to the change. All these three stages of the organizational learning process happen only through individuals in the organization. Hence, commitment of the individuals is the most important deciding factor on which rests the question whether an organization is a learning organization or not.

According to Peter Senge, the two types of learning are: adaptive learning, required to survive and generative learning, to actualize creative potentials. Here, we can line this concept of generative learning to Maslow's self-actualization need where individuals are not motivated by extrinsic factors but purely by their inner urge. The dimension that distinguishes learning organizations from traditional organizations is the mastery of certain basic disciplines or 'component technologies'. The five basic disciplines that Peter Senge identifies are: a) Systems thinking b) Personal mastery c) Mental models d) Building shared vision e) Team learning.

Systems thinking helps us understand interlinks and gives the ability to see the system as a whole. Personal mastery is the discipline of 'continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively'. This is a process of continuous learning at the individual level. Unless individuals learn, organizations cannot learn. It requires a structure to support and encourage the commitment of its employees. Dealing with different mental models of different individuals is the single most important challenge facing the learning organization.

Unless the goal of the system is translated into simple terms, which are understandable to individuals, a shared vision cannot emerge. More than understanding, the individuals in the organizations should identify themselves with such goals. Team Learning is the process of developing the capability of a team to realize its cherished goals, the goals that they truly desire to achieve. Being a team player implies 'getting along well' whereas team learning calls for common mental models and common shared goals.

After Peter Senge's contribution about learning organization, there are other significant ideas like distributed intelligence, shared leadership and so on, which has evolved. These all together help organizations to move away from the traditional paradigms to emergent paradigms.