

## **Cultural Learning Organizations: A Model**

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### **VIII. Final conclusions**

This long study has attempted to analyze the concept of LO and its possible implementation in public non-profit cultural organizations through the analysis of a particular cultural organization as a case study. Although it can be said that almost every organization learns from its experiences, this learning does not necessarily mean that the organization is a LO. Due to the lack of a consistent framework in LO literature to define and implement the LO, first, I have proposed a new model of LO, grounded on previous literature, which tries to be a practical reflection tool for practitioners who wish to put this concept into action in their organizations. This model tries to organize LO values, principles, systems and processes (that were mixed up in previous literature) in a coherent and pragmatic structure. It is divided in two main parts: ‘the ethics of the ‘learning organization’’, which means the combination of values, ways of thinking, spirit and culture of an organization which promotes learning in the organization; and ‘the ‘learning organization’ infrastructure’’ which consists of the ensemble of structures, processes and systems of the LO. So, a working definition of the concept, which includes both behavioural and structural perspectives, has been proposed. A LO is an organization, where in order to reach the common objectives and vision of the organization, distributed leadership promotes reflection (self-reflection and organizational reflection) and inquiry, participation at all levels and continuous sharing of knowledge, all of them supported by structural communication, individual development and participative decision-making.

Secondly, the proposed model has been used to analyze barriers and strengths for cultural organizations to LO completion. After this examination it can be said that most of these

organizations cannot be judged to be a LO, although they certainly learn<sup>1</sup> and implement several systems in order to incorporate certain reflective activity and information storage that, if improved, could help to foster learning in these organizations. Moreover, some of their culture values could serve as a rich soil to sow LO seeds if a trusting atmosphere is promoted.

However, the analysis of a public non-profit cultural organization has raised some specific questions related to these particular kinds of organizations that have not been studied by LO theory up to now. Cultural organizations, in general, and art organizations in particular, are mostly project-based nowadays. This condition creates new challenges to LO concept: project autonomy, uniqueness, time-pressure and temporariness, 'knowledge silos', coordination conflicts with the formal organization structure, people-embedded knowledge, focus on outcomes, a heterogeneous mixture of external and internal organization members and difficulties for designing formal tools for reusing project knowledge. I suggest that these characteristics, although they can block learning, can be used to build over them innovative management strategies such as inter-project reflection and project knowledge reintegration systems; or information systems that nurture networks of organization members and help to identify who has a particular knowledge or has participated in previous projects.

The analysis has also raised other relevant issues related to public non-profit cultural organizations and LO. Political, economic and legal constraints determine their organizational structure, planning, strategies and activities and can create obstacles to learning and to LO implementation. Political boards and their risk-adverse mindset together with external political struggles, restrictive public and administrative law, accountability, public scrutiny and mode of financing can limit the freedom of most public non-profit organizations to implement the LO approach. These issues can be difficult to assimilate with LO spirit of experimentation, collective reflection or participative decision-making. Nevertheless, it has been shown in this

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<sup>1</sup> Although this learning can be normally described as department nested and is stronger in some departments than in others.

study that these organizations have other traits, such as their ‘mission-driven’ character, their assured<sup>2</sup> government funding and their strong commitment to their public purpose that can be a good raw material to start to reflect on LO model inside the organization.

This examination has also shown that cultural organizations draw attention to other issues that can be difficult to make compatible with LO concept (like strong ‘artistic/cultural’ leadership) or can serve as a powerful engine to build the LO spirit (such as a passion for experimentation and innovation).

In addition, the research has pointed out that both public non-profit and cultural organizations are required (by political or artistic/cultural reasons) to concentrate significantly on their programs which impedes reflection upon organization members and management and prevents any LO management change.

All these issues suggested the need to modify the initial model and two new factors were added to the previous LO model: the political and legal environment and the organizational dimension (functional and/or project dimensions). Further academic research is necessary in the area of project-based, public non-profit and cultural organizations and LO. It is essential to study in depth what strategies can be adopted to lessen negative aspects of some of the issues noted in this study and to foster the positive ones.

Finally, the most common argument against the LO is that its implementation is not a guarantee for organization success and product/service quality and that “the relationship between learning effectiveness and overall firm performance has yet to be established empirically” (Prencipe & Tell, 2001 after Eisenhardt & Santos, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Although all of this is true

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<sup>2</sup> Although variable.

<sup>3</sup> Eisenhardt, K.M., Santos, F.M. (2001) Knowledge-based view: a new theory of strategy? In: Pettigrew, A., Thomas, H., Whittington, R. (eds) (2001) *Handbook of Strategy and Management*. Sage, London. Quoted in Prencipe & Tell, 2001.

I think that LO spirit promotes a sense of common purpose and collective engagement that benefits the whole organization. So maybe LO is not the panacea for high achievement and innovation, and maybe its implementation will find political and social obstacles, but at least it can foster commitment and an organizational climate of well-being that are, in my opinion, essential for lasting good performance. In addition, a proactive organization which strives for a ground-breaking product or service merits an innovative management which has the ability to care about the organization itself and its members.

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