

## Cultural Learning Organizations: A Model

© Eva Moraga, Madrid, 2006

### III. 3 The 'learning organization' infrastructure

#### III. 3. 1 Structural Communication

Communication is, in my opinion, the most relevant pillar of LO. It is the big organization maker. Its task is not only to maintain what already exists but to create the organization itself, its culture, its values, its way of acting and being. As Barker & Camarata say, "communication fulfils an organization-making function rather than just an organization-maintaining one" (1998:1). That is why communication plays, as well, a crucial role in the implementation of LO model, because it is only through communication that organization members can be engaged with this LO project. However, there has hardly been LO literature specifically focussed on this issue (Sandine, 1996; Baker & Camarata, 1998).

LO literature has mainly focused on information, dealing with communication issues tangentially. This might be due to the fact that information is more tangible and manageable than communication which is interpreted as a more abstract concept. The dictionary definition of 'communication'<sup>1</sup> itself includes, as the essential feature of this concept, information sharing with others by different means, which is also emphasizing information issues. It is evident that it is easier to control what is transmitted (data, information) than the process of exchange (communication). Therefore, it is comprehensible that LO literature concentrates on information. Thus, expressions like 'informating' (Pedler et al., 1989), 'information flow' (Bennett & O'Brien, 1994) or 'information technology systems' (Kelleher, 2004) are repeatedly used in LO literature together with other like 'repositories of knowledge' (Wilhelm, 2006),

---

<sup>1</sup> Communication: "the act of communicating with people". To communicate: "to share information with others by speaking, writing, moving your body or using other signals." Cambridge Dictionary online.

'transfers of knowledge' (Goh and Richards, 1997) or 'systems to capture and share learning' (Watkins & Marsick, 1993), all of them meaning the exchange and transfer of data across the organization. All these terms are frequently placed nowadays under a common and fashionable roof called 'knowledge management' (Koenig, 1998; King, 2006).

However, these information and 'knowledge management' systems, in my opinion, have to be considered just as a component of communication, although an important one. As Barker & Camarata say "what potentially makes the communication in learning organizations different from that in other organizations is the dissemination and shared interpretation of information" (1998:1) and what is clear is that 'Knowledge management' systems can be helpful and crucial for that task. However, inside the organization there are other processes that equally convey information and shape organizational communication (like organizational charts, informal encounters, meeting groups or internal documentation). That is the reason why I call this pillar 'structural communication' because communication is embedded in every organization aspect. A LO would be, then, an organization which - through internal and external communication<sup>2</sup> - first, promotes the propagation, diffusion and spreading of information through its different structural levels, members, and stakeholders, and second, fosters a collective analysis and understanding of that information. In this process "the amount, timing, and kinds of communication used are paramount to learning" (Baker & Camarata (1998:1)). The LO communication systems should encourage, then, all the phases of the organizational learning cycle (Dixon, 1994). All organization members must be responsible for environmental and internal scanning in order to collect and generate new information; these new data have to be

---

<sup>2</sup> I understand internal and external communication in the sense proposed by Kreps (1990). Internal organizational communication "occurs within the boundaries of the organization among organization members" and external organizational communication "occurs across the boundaries of the organization between organization members and representatives of the organization's environment" (Kreps (1990:201)). Internal communication includes formal (the arrangement of organizational levels, divisions, and departments, job positions and responsibilities and job descriptions) and informal channels (social interaction among organization members). External communication "involves the giving and taking of information between organizations and their relevant environments". It implies two interrelated activities: "sending organizational information to representatives of the relevant environment" and "seeking pertinent information from the relevant environment for the organization" (Kreps (1990:229)).

quick and accurately integrated in the organization and must be interpreted collectively; and organization individuals should have the authority to act according to the new knowledge they have acquired through communal interpretation.<sup>3</sup> These stages should be integrated in every work and communication process that takes place inside the organization. It is the only way in which reflection can be transformed in action, experimentation and innovation.

As Andrade (2005) indicates communication is a system that integrates two components that interact strongly: the psycho-social or human element and the technical factor (which includes technology, structure and administrative processes). In the LO model I propose the human component would be informed by the values and principles of the organization ('the ethics of the LO') and would include systems of informal communication and transmission of tacit knowledge; and the technical factor would be represented by structure, knowledge management systems, formal communication processes and administrative flows of information.<sup>4</sup>

LO literature advocates for lean, flat and open structures (Senge et al., 1994), grounded on some OL theories that consider departmental structures (Morgan, 1986)<sup>5</sup>, centralized structures

---

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Dixon relates her organizational learning cycle with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, D.A. (1984) *The Experiential Learning Cycle* Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall), which tries to explain individual learning. The stages of Kolb's individual learning cycle ('concrete experience', 'reflective observation', 'abstract conceptualization' and 'abstract experimentation') are translated by Dixon to the organizational context as the 'widespread generation of information', the 'integration of new/local information in the organizational context', the 'collective interpretation of information' and 'having the authority to take responsible action based on the interpreted meaning' (Dixon, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> LO spirit must inform, in my opinion, all aspects of organizational communication pointed out by Andrade (2005): both external - meaning the ensemble of messages transmitted by the organization to different external publics -, and internal - implying the whole of activities pursued by the organization to keep its members informed, integrated and motivated to reach the organization objectives -. Both of them have to be perfectly synchronized in a global communication system which integrates vertical, horizontal (between different or equal hierarchical levels) and diagonal communication (between levels, areas and departments); formal (organization official sources of information) and informal communication (non-official network of interpersonal relationships); interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group and institutional communication; verbal (written and non-written) and non-verbal communication (corporal language, voice, physical spaces, facilities etc); and direct and indirect communication (face to face or through different intermediary means).

<sup>5</sup> Because they can lead to fragmented learning.

(Fiol and Lyles, 1985)<sup>6</sup> and hierarchy (Pawlowsky, 1992)<sup>7</sup> as barriers to learning. However, empirical research does not coherently seem to support this last assumption (Berthoin Antal et al., 2001). Further research would be necessary about LO and organizational structures. In my opinion, learning should and can be fostered in every kind of structure, although any structure implies different learning problems to solve. What is evident is that the formal arrangement of organization structure influences communication and must be, therefore, studied very thoroughly by LO implementers and should be included in this pillar.

Last, I also include 'team learning' in the 'structural communication' pillar. This concept is commonly referred to separately (Senge, 1990; Bennet & O'Brien, 1994; Kelleher, 2004) as an independent LO element and does not imply team building or team skill development but the transfer of learning experience between team members and between other teams (Kelleher, 2004) and "the process of learning how to learn collectively" (Senge (1990:355)). Collective learning and experience transfer is only possible through communication. That is why, for me, 'team learning' is only a consequence of good communication processes and must be included in 'structural communication' concept.

---

<sup>6</sup> Fiol, C.M. and Lyles, M.A. (1985) Organizational Learning. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 803-13. Quoted in Berthoin Antal et al., 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Pawlowsky, P. (1992) 'Betriebliche Qualifikationsstrategien und organisationales Lernen', in Staehle, W.H., Conrad, P. (eds.) *Managementforschung* (Vol.2). Berlin, De Gruyter, 177-237. Quoted in Berthoin Antal et al., 2001.