

Leadership Qualities: The Learning Organization

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In his famous dialogue *The Republic*, the Greek philosopher Plato tells “The Parable of the Cave,” in which a group of subterranean people mistake the shadows they see in the cave for reality. In Plato’s original telling of the story, when one of the people discovers the truth about the source of the shadows and attempts to share his knowledge with the others, they rise up and slaughter him. Plato’s conclusion to his story is a chilling one: We are *all* misguided cave dwellers, operating under incomplete or distorted perceptions of reality and violently resistant to having those perceptions challenged.

The discussion around this idea is important because mental models limit us every day. Organizational case studies abound of good ideas that never got off the ground, simply because they didn’t match the prevailing assumptions or beliefs. One popular illustration is of the Swiss watch industry, which dominated the world market for watches for many years. When the new quartz technology was first introduced, the Swiss manufacturers rejected it, since it didn’t match their mental model that watches should be mechanical, “ticking” devices – rather than high-tech ones. Instead, Japanese manufacturers like Seiko adopted the new technology, and rapidly took much of the world market from the Swiss. The Swiss fall in the global watch market can be traced back to their dependence on their mental models about what made watches desirable – their unwillingness to leave their cave.

Proponents of change have learned that the biggest barrier to organizational reengineering is the past success of the institution. Observers have noted that “American

companies are now performing so badly precisely because they used to perform so well.”¹ In other words, a company such as IBM became successful because it was uniquely designed for the time in which it prospered. Once that context changed, however, the previous insights and processes that once brought success now guaranteed failure. As a result, the problem with America’s business world is that it entered the 21st century with companies designed during the 19th century to work well in the 20th century, and the old ways of doing business simply don’t work anymore.

Learning from the Past

Our minds were designed to stay sharp, but, like anything else, they need to be exercised. When we allow our minds to grow flabby through a lack of critical thought and stimulation, we can become dull and insensitive. This spells disaster, and the truth is that this kind of failure usually comes during times of prosperity and success. Following a smashing success, it’s easy to kick back and rest, to assume that current knowledge and achievements will assure future success. That’s a dangerous attitude. Unfortunately, it’s the one that the ancient Israelites adopted after the death of Joshua and his generation:

The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel.

Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance....

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger because they forsook him.... In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to

¹ Michael Hammer and James Champy, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1993), p. 10

raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

Joshua 2:7-14

Joshua had led the Israelites in the conquest of the promised land. His generation had personally witnessed God damming up the Jordan River and orchestrating the fall of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 3:6). Yet the very next generation “knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). What a tragic and scathing statement. An entire generation had failed to learn in any life-changing way about God or his deeds. The void left by their ignorance allowed room in their hearts and minds to embrace idols and pagan peoples. Ultimately, it led them into sin and brought down the anger of the Lord upon them. They knew the stories of their predecessors’ successes and failures, but they didn’t *learn* anything from them.

Thus begins a cycle that is repeated throughout the book of Judges: sin, servitude, supplication, salvation and silence. The people rebel against God (sin); God hands them over to their enemies as punishment (servitude); the people cry out to God for deliverance (supplication); God sends a deliverer in the form of a judge (salvation); the nation would enjoy a period of peace (silence). And then the process begins all over again. Seven times through the book of Judges, the people of Israel follow this downward spiral. Why? Because they never learn from their experience.

What a monotonous and depressing pattern! The only interesting thing in the book of Judges is to see how God delivers them. Each time he uses imagination and creativity; no deliverer is like another. Sin is boring and predictable. God’s righteousness brings freedom and options. Sin is tedious and destructive; righteousness is creative and constructive.

When nations, organizations or teams stop learning, they’re setting themselves up for failure. Because the Israelites refused to learn from their history, they were doomed to repeat it.

The same is true for individuals and groups today who haven't learned from their experiences. Effective leaders know this. They do their best to create an atmosphere that encourages learning within their organizations and teams. They remember the principles gleaned through experiences, and they help their people to apply them to new situations.

Progressive Revelation

Dostoevsky's great novel *Crime and Punishment* is not assigned reading for kindergarten classes. Neither do we teach advanced engineering mathematics or quantum physics to first graders. A lengthy process of development and learning is necessary before people are ready to tackle these more sophisticated subjects. Similarly, God gives us greater amounts of illumination as we respond to the light we have already received.

When the Old Testament prophets received divine oracles for the people of Israel and Judah, they realized that there were significant aspects of these messages that eluded their grasp. Isaiah must have struggled with the meaning of the material in chapters such as 4; 9; 11; 35; 42; 53 and 61. Daniel realized that the significance of many portions of his oracle was beyond his grasp: "I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, 'My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?' He replied, 'Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end'" (Daniel 12:8-9). Peter explains this lack of complete understanding:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

1 Peter 1:10-12

God's Word is a progressive revelation in which clearer and fuller insights concerning the person and work of God were communicated in a gradual and dynamic way. The people of God received increasing light over the centuries, especially during the lives of Moses and Joshua, the period of the prophets following Elijah and Elisha, and the time of Jesus and the apostles. God is the master pedagogue – he knows just the right time to communicate the next lesson. There is no point in conveying additional light if a group or a person does not have the capacity to receive it or has not responded appropriately to the light that has already been given.

Paul writes, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). He also tells the church in Corinth, “These things happened to [the nation of Israel] as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). In other words, God's people throughout the centuries have been a model of what a learning organization looks like. The lessons from the past – both learned and unlearned – have been recorded for our benefit.

Responding to New Information

Reading the Old Testament can be a frustrating experience, especially if we've read it before and know what's going to happen. We find ourselves wishing that the stubborn Israelites would just obey God and turn away from idolatry, but they continue to ruin their own lives by refusing to learn from their experiences. Then we come to the realization that they remind us of ourselves. In Zechariah 1:2-6 we find God's Word to the remnant who had returned to the land following their exile:

“The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord Almighty. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets

proclaimed: This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.' But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?

"Then they repented and said, 'The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.'"

Zechariah 1:2-6

These sad words were given to a people whose forefathers had refused to learn from the Lord in spite of the many prophets God had sent to warn them of the consequences of their ways. The essence of the prophetic message from the Lord was, "Return to me, and I will return to you." Had their forefathers done so, the exile would not have occurred, and the people would have enjoyed the blessings, protection and provision of God in their land without fear of famine or conquest. Now the Lord is telling the generation of Zechariah that the same message applies to them. If they trust and obey the Lord instead of falling into the same trap that ruined their ancestors, they will enjoy the rich blessings of fellowship with God.

Revelation always demands a response. Dr. Walt Kaiser, President of Gordon-Conwell

Theological Seminary, writes:

How important is it to respond to God's Word and to offer to him a tender heart and receptive spirit. It is not sufficient to know that the Bible is God's Word or to argue for its inerrancy; we must, with a spirit of contriteness and humility, act on the basis of what it says. When we hear the Word proclaimed and applied to our times and people, surely we can sense that something is drastically wrong. Indeed, rather than result in indifference or unconcern, the Word of God will always "overtake" and arrest the humble and tender-hearted person, leading him or her on to obedience. O for more willing, responsive, and grateful hearts, minds, and feet!²

When people fail to learn from and apply what they have received from the Lord, they stop growing and lose their personal effectiveness. Moreover, they become an abomination to God. As the history of Israel makes clear, it is quite possible to regress and "unlearn" spiritual truth.

² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Revive Us Again* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), p. 143.

And what is true for an individual is also true for a group, an organization, a nation or a civilization. One Old Testament scholar writes, “The [Word of God] will survive; of this we have no doubt. But will the generation that loses knowledge of it? This is our concern.”³

The Upward Spiral

Continuous improvement requires continuous learning. Only the learning organization will, over the long haul, continue to grow. Paul provided the Colossian church with a marvelous insight into the concept of growth through learning:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

Colossians 1:9-10

The fundamentals of the faith constantly bear repeating. In doing so, we find ourselves undoing the downward spiral with an upward spiral of God’s design. Robertson McQuilkin writes about this upward spiral in his book *Life in the Spirit*:

All of us begin the same – on the spiral down away from God, toward ever greater destruction. That’s life without the Spirit. But life with the Spirit is another story – the story of an upward spiral toward God....

The glorious spiral up: the more I know Him, the more I trust Him; the more I trust Him, the more I love Him; the more I love Him, the more I obey Him; the more I obey Him, the more I become like Him; the more I become like Him, the greater capacity I have to love Him; the more I love Him....⁴

Paul wanted the Colossian church to learn – a desire all wise leaders have for their followers. Because he was addressing a functioning organization, Paul taught the Colossians to “learn-on-the-run.” No organization can afford to ignore the curriculum that is built into its daily activities.

Paul knew that people would learn if they were provided with:

³ C.E. Autrey, *Revivals of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), p. 34.

⁴ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Life in the Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), p. 16.

- Standards (v. 9). For the church, it is knowledge of God’s will. Followers in any enterprise can’t improve unless they know what “better” and “ideal” looks like. Leaders must set and communicate standards.
- Instruction (v. 9). Knowing the standard and grasping its significance (wisdom and understanding) are not the same. Policy and procedure manuals lacking this second component may only confuse and frustrate.
- Practice (v. 10). Until people “live a life,” they’re unaware of what they don’t understand. People need to try – to succeed or to safely fail – as part of their growth. Leaders provide mentors, helpers to guide as people attempt to do what is expected.
- Feedback (v. 10). Paul knew that, as people began to apply new learning, their effort would bear fruit. As activity produces product, people need to know how they measure up. Hearing, “That’s good” or “Not quite, try again” is essential to growth. The important difference between “inspectors” and “teachers” is that “inspectors” often find only flaws in the work, while “teachers” help the workers to grow.
- Release (v. 10). The learner eventually grows on his or her own, having gained sufficient confidence and sophistication to ask new questions and to use the standards to guide further learning.

Paul’s desire was for the Colossian church to become a learning church. Not merely a church where people could come and hear a lecture, this church could become a place where disciples (students) could come and, in the context of healthy relationships, experience, connect, reflect and test the fundamentals of the Christian faith. A true learning environment is not designed for people to simply sit and soak; it is a place where beliefs become practices, where hands and feet are attached to our brains.

In 1990, learning theorist John M. Carroll presented a case study against contemporary instructional methods in his book called *The Nurnberg Funnel*.⁵ The title is a reference to the absurd image of the Funnel of Nurnberg, a ridiculous device that supposedly allowed copious amounts of knowledge to be transferred directly to a student via a funnel inserted into the brain. Such an image may seem laughable to us, but all we need to do is take a stroll around most organizations to find the principle very much alive. Carroll deconstructs learning methods that

⁵ John M. Carroll, *The Nurnberg Funnel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

rely on such activities as listening, recording, memorizing and regurgitating – with very little personal connection or application. This old worldview is called *Instructivism*, and in his book, Carroll takes a critical look at many of the false assumptions of the Nurnberg-ish approach. Specifically, he finds that instructivism assumes that:

- Everyone learns best by listening and receiving information. This gives rise to the speaker's motto: "Tell them what you're going to tell them. Then tell them what you just told them."
- People will naturally make the bridge from theory to application. This is why so many meetings end with some variation of this: "Here's a graphic of our four-quadrant model. Hang it up in your office so you'll remember to apply it."
- Knowledge transfer is a passive process, in which new awareness is transferred from a teacher to a student. This is how consultants make a living: "Listen to me; I'm the expert."⁶

What is now being proposed by many learning theorists is a seismic shift in corporate learning and communications from an instructor-centered orientation to one that is learner-centered. This is the core of the rapidly growing body of knowledge that is experiential learning. But this shift requires leaders who are secure enough in their own identity to risk stepping out of the center of attention. In a learning organization, the focus isn't on the leader; it's on the ideas that are being generated by the organization. Harry S. Truman Reagan is said to have had a plaque in his office that read, "You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit."

Creating a Climate of Openness

The primary challenge of our early years is naiveté and a lack of direction. When we move into our middle years, our major challenge seems to be double-mindedness and entanglement. By the time we reach our later years, our major problem seems to be a lack of teachability – a stubborn

⁶ Ibid., pp. 49-72.

and arrogant unwillingness to learn. If we stop the process of learning and growing and gaining insight, we will lose the purposes for which God has called us. We are to be agents of change in this world as long as we are in this world. There is no retirement age in the business of building God's kingdom. When we lose the desire to discover new things, we lose the cutting edge of a renewed mind. Next comes double-mindedness and entanglement, and there we go back down the downward spiral towards conformity to this world and alienation from God.

In light of this, it is interesting that one of the greatest revivals in the Old Testament came under the leadership of King Josiah, who assumed the throne at the ripe, old age of eight (2 Chronicles 34:1). When Josiah was 16, he began to earnestly seek after God's heart (v. 3a), and when he was 20, he began a national reformation (v. 3b). When he was 26, Josiah issued orders to repair the temple of the Lord (v. 8), leading to a rediscovery of the Book of the Law (v. 14) and a reinstatement of the Passover Celebration (35:1).

The significance of Josiah's reform can be seen in the fact that he destroyed the altars that Solomon had built for his foreign wives (2 Kings 23:13). These altars had stood for 300 years! No other king had done anything about them. Then, when Josiah went through the land, he destroyed the altar in Bethel, where Jeroboam had set up a golden calf. That altar had also stood for more than 300 years. Other kings had promoted the worship of God, but none of Josiah's predecessors had the courage to destroy the pagan altars in the land. Josiah did what no other king before him had been prepared to do.

This story wonderfully illustrates what happens when an organization "learns." In an excellent analysis of organizations as learning systems, Nevis, DiBella and Gould identified 10 "facilitating factors that expedite learning," in an organization. All 10 are important, but the fifth one that they cite is indispensable to the rest. They suggest a "Climate of Openness":

Are the boundaries around information flow permeable so people can make their own observations? Much informal learning is a function of daily, often unplanned interactions among people. In addition, the opportunity to meet with other groups and see higher levels of management in operation promotes learning. People need freedom to express their views through legitimate disagreement and debate. Another critical aspect is the extent to which errors are shared and not hidden.⁷

Josiah allowed – even commanded – his people to spread the new information about God’s law openly. Further, “the extent to which errors [were being] shared and not hidden” reached King Josiah himself. He too repented and changed his ways (34:27-33). Without a climate of openness, learning is stifled. With it, organizational learning, as we see in Josiah’s reform, can take on enormous dimensions. If leaders model learning by openly sharing their own areas of growth, followers feel confident to do the same. An open climate is an essential component for any group that wants to become an effective learning system.

⁷ “Understanding Organizations as Learning Systems,” by Nevis, DiBella and Gould. *Sloan Management Review*, Winter 1995, pp. 73-75.