

Learning Histories

By Olivier Serrat

All Aboard!

In the corporate world, the precedence ascribed to individual learning can run counter to organizational learning, the process by which an organization and its people develop their capabilities to create a desired future. Without doubt, developing capabilities is a precondition of a desired future; however, if the essence of a learning organization is that it actively identifies, creates, stores, shares, and uses knowledge¹ to anticipate, adapt to, and maybe even shape a changing environment, the driving concern must be reflection, communication, and collective sense making



How can we gauge the successes and failures of collective learning? How can the rest of the organization benefit from the experience? Learning histories surface the thinking, experiments, and arguments of actors who engaged in organizational change.

The only man I know who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew each time he sees me. The rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.

—George Bernard Shaw

for action across its personnel.² (Proponents of organizational learning grumble that people in organizations perform collectively yet still learn individually from incomplete, heterogeneous information to which they ascribe different meaning.)³ Intra-

¹ Knowledge management activities begin with identifying what core tacit and explicit knowledge should be at hand, including its sources. Knowledge creation is the process of making tacit knowledge explicit. Knowledge storage sees that routines are applied to retain essential knowledge. Knowledge sharing involves the dissemination to others of what has been generated in usable forms. Knowledge utilization entails integrating what knowledge has been identified, created, stored, and shared so that it can be assimilated and generalized to new situations.

² Knowledge per se is not of much consequence; its value resides in application. Hence, knowledge is better understood as the potential for effective action.

³ Pace self- and independent evaluation, there are still few tools, methods, and approaches with which to capture institutional experience and broadcast with effect to clearly identified users what practicable lessons well up from that. (All attempts to enhance organizational performance must ultimately prove their own value: why should one create knowledge that does not respond to needs of or gets absorbed by those parts of a system that invite it most? Two problems continue to limit self- and independent evaluation: (i) the “lessons learned”—that should more accurately be termed “lessons to be learned”—are not often well formulated; and (ii) processes to promote ownership and uptake of lessons are rarely fully fledged.) Conversely, where appreciative inquiry informs generative approaches to organizational development, write-ups of good practices that were shown to be effective in one part of the organization and might be in another habitually count out the false starts and failures one could learn from as well as the hidden logic and toil that made the breakthroughs possible. The case study method—synonymous with education for management since the early 20th century—ignores the rich context of organizational challenge: in the real world, for example, problems are not clean, clear, or discrete; information is seldom of the quality or quantity required; and both stakeholder consultation and decision rights constrain progress toward resolution of complex issues. In a different genre, data from in-house and external surveys will not mean much if the latter are not well designed and would still need to be acted upon if it does. And what of strategic reviews by high-level panels assembled to promote new thinking, possibly even jump-start reform? As it happens, the eminent persons who comprise them are pragmatic: by and large, their reports are tailored to please those who hired them—not critique arrangements with evidence from the frontline—and only rarely better the workings of an organization.

organizational interaction for learning cannot depend on serendipity:⁴ it must be encouraged, facilitated, recognized, and rewarded. Increasingly, narration is deemed a good vessel for bridging knowledge and action in the workplace.

Storytelling in Organizations

A story is a narrative of events or circumstances, or a series of them, designed to draw attention, amuse, or instruct. Organizations have a renewed interest in this ancient yet powerful form of sense making to exchange and consolidate sometimes complex knowledge:⁵ potentially, storytelling can, for example, convey values and associated norms; prompt emotional connection; share the tacit knowledge in peoples' heads; build trust, engagement, and collaboration; facilitate unlearning; and spark action. Individually and collectively, by opening perspective, stories help us fathom times past and understand possible futures.⁶

Stimulating Reflection in Action

Too often, slip-ups happen again: the intellect, relationships, and routines that set them in motion have not been examined—if they have been discussed—and spawn further mishap. Basically, many efforts to foster organizational learning fall short because reflective practice is not easy to master; neither—in the rare cases when senior management introduces and backs tools, methods, and approaches for that—is it seen to provide immediate solutions to pressing business problems. *Perhaps there is only one cardinal sin: impatience. Because of impatience we were driven out of Paradise, because of impatience we cannot return*, thought W.H. Auden. In the meantime, surely, the continuing development of research methods and measures of knowledge management and learning remains a priority. The questions that should direct investigations in actionable knowledge transfer are: What types of organizational learning work effectively and what types do not? Why?

I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught.

—Winston Churchill

Each year has been so robust with problems and successes and learning experiences and human experiences that a year is a lifetime at Apple. So this has been ten lifetimes.

—Steve Jobs

Of some cheer is that a relatively recent, qualitative action research⁷ methodology, the learning history,⁸ can help an organization become more collectively aware of learning and change efforts within its boundaries—even when these have not been adequately documented in advance. The fresh, new medium is a document (or series of documents)⁹ presented in a two-column format 25–100 pages long that captures retrospectively perceptions of critical events or circumstances, insights of actors¹⁰ regarding notable hard and soft¹¹ results from these, and objective analyses to build capacity for reflection and communication. Hence, it can be employed to deliberate, assess, and evaluate any learning opportunity. (That might be an organizational change, initiative, innovation, product launch, etc.) Of course, the value of a learning history

⁴ In organizations where knowledge is dominant, daily operations should be designed to raise its productivity.

⁵ Much knowledge can be codified in formal, systematic language and shared in discussion or writing. But much also cannot be easily abstracted and conveyed explicitly and requires communicative forms that synthesize rather than explicate—stories are such a form, with undoubted use to share multi-dimensional information and emotion in various domains if they are well designed and well told. A useful way to characterize explicit and tacit knowledge is to consider each type, respectively, as the core and the context.

⁶ For sure, not all narratives are good stories: as a minimum, one must be clear about why they are being told, keep them simple and accessible, use more than one medium if possible, monitor and evaluate how the accounts are received, and continuously hone storytelling (and story-listening) skills.

⁷ Action research is a reflective, constructively self-critical process of progressive problem solving aimed to enhance the performance of individuals, groups, and organizations in their working environment.

⁸ Art Kleiner and George Roth are the co-developers of this new form of corporate oral history. See Art Kleiner and George Roth. 1997. How to Make Experience Your Company's Best Teacher. *Harvard Business Review*. September–October. pp. 172–177. The Critical Incident technique is another, related tool for identifying, describing, and enhancing learning processes that focuses on specific events or circumstances.

⁹ In the age of the internet, the possibility also exists to include multimedia products.

¹⁰ They are the persons who initiated, implemented, or participated in the event or circumstance; they include champions, skeptics, people who benefitted or were affected, and close observers.

¹¹ Many results that cannot be measured must still be managed. An interview protocol based on notable results might ask: Which results from this project or program do you think are significant? What else can you tell us about them?

does not lie in the document produced: it stems from the consultation process that engendered it.

Noteworthy characteristics of a learning history are that: (i) it takes a systems view of organizations; (ii) it makes extensive use of narrative and cuts back and forth between different recollections to generate multiple stories; (iii) it brings assumptions, reactions, and implications to light; (iv) it helps people tell stories without fear of being judged, measured, and evaluated—assessment is not emotionally neutral territory; (v) it dissolves hierarchical privileges and makes for conversations among equals; (vi) it does not directly explicit the knowledge embodied, unlike “lessons learned” and good practices: rather, the actors must construct and surface tacit knowledge from the events or circumstances and their own experiences and discussions of them; (vii) it helps learn from both the good and the not-so-good;¹² and (viii) it catalyzes double-loop thinking and reconsideration of values, reasoning, impulses, or practices to achieve a desired future.

The audiences of a learning history are the actors, looking for perspective on what they accomplished so they may move forward without having to reinvent what has already discovered; newcomers, who might need to be informed; the organization they belong to, which usually knows what it wants to hear but may lack the capacity to listen to what it is trying to tell itself; and, possibly, interested parties outside the organization.

Documenting Organizational Learning

The two-column format of a learning history keeps the commentaries of the research team separate from the reminiscences of the actors. The right-hand column is a jointly told tale that presents a deliberately emotional story of events or circumstances through interwoven quotations¹³ of actors; the individual, free-flowing, audio-recorded and transcribed retrospective interviews that generate them last about 1 hour.¹⁴ The left-hand column contains analytical comments by a research team,¹⁵ which distill key recurring themes in the narrative; query assumptions, reactions, and implications; raise undiscussable subjects; and make recommendations. Full column text at the top sets the context and background of each thematic section. Once it has been written, the learning history is validated by the actors and disseminated for group discussion in workshops seeking shared understanding and responses to two questions: So what? What’s next?¹⁶ Re-experiencing the event or circumstance, the group learns collectively and its members make meaning together.

We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.

—Peter Drucker

¹² The not-so-good represents the gap between aspiration and reality: where a learning history acts as a mirror to an organization is where it brings most value.

¹³ Each person is identified only by title but quoted directly. As actors review the learning history and find that their points of view are represented fairly, they come to appreciate the perspectives of others (and may even recognize their own blinders).

¹⁴ Principal actors may need to be interviewed several times: they understand things more clearly on the second (or third) time.

¹⁵ The research team had best combine (concerned and knowledgeable) insiders and (trained) outsiders: almost inevitably, an organization’s personnel finds it difficult to reflect objectively on events or circumstances because it has ongoing relationships and is swayed by corporate culture; outsiders, on the other hand, can feel pressured to take on routine note-taking work, which drains the time available for critical thinking.

¹⁶ The development of a learning history often follows six stages: planning, reflective interviews, distillation, writing, validation, and dissemination.

Further Reading

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George Roth and Art Kleiner. 1998. Developing Organizational Memory through Learning Histories. *Organizational Dynamics*. Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 43–60.

For further information

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