

WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING?

Organisations – groups of people who come together to accomplish a purpose hold an important key to this question. The field of **organisational learning** explores ways to design organisations so that they fulfil their function effectively, encourage people to reach their full potential, and, at the same time, improve the environment in which they operate. The world seems to be changing faster and faster – from the technologies available to us to the increasingly global scope of our interactions. How do we navigate such change and address these problems?

This field is rooted in a set of powerful principles, values, and disciplines. As Peter Senge wrote in his seminal book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organisation*, an organisation is learning when it can bring about the future it most desires. In the business community, learning is much more than just a way to create the future you seek; in today's fast-paced, highly competitive work world, it may actually give your organisation the edge it needs to survive – and thereby keep fulfilling its purpose.

Organisational learning focused originally on the practice of five core disciplines, or capacities, of which Systems Thinking forms the cornerstone:

- ▶ Systems Thinking
- ▶ Team Learning
- ▶ Shared Vision
- ▶ Mental Models
- ▶ Personal Mastery

SYSTEMS THINKING The art of seeing the world in terms of wholes, and the practice of focusing on the relationships among the parts of a system. By looking at reality through a systems thinking "lens," you can work with a system – rather than against it – to create enduring solutions to stubborn problems in every arena of your life. Practising this discipline involves learning to recognise "signature" systemic behaviours all around you, and familiarising yourself with some special terminology and some powerful tools unique to this field.

TEAM LEARNING This is what happens when a group of people working on something together experiences that rare feeling of synergy and productiveness that happens when you're "in the groove." When a team is truly learning, the group as a whole becomes much more than just the sum of its parts. Practising this discipline involves startlingly different kinds

of conversations and a remarkable degree of honesty and mutual respect – all of which you can learn to do through familiarising yourself with specific tools from this field.

SHARED VISION emerges when everyone in an organisation understands what the organisation is trying to do, is genuinely committed to achieving that vision, and clearly grasps how his or her role in the organisation can contribute to making the vision real. Practising this discipline involves knowing how all the parts of the organisation work together and being clear about how your own personal goals align with those of your organisation.

MENTAL MODELS are the deep beliefs and assumptions we hold about how the world works. These models shape the decisions we make in life, the actions we take in response to events, and the ways in which we interpret others' behaviour. Practising this discipline involves surfacing and testing your deepest assumptions and beliefs, and helping others do the same. Again, there are specific tools available from this field that can help you with this practice.

PERSONAL MASTERY is the art of identifying what mark you want to leave on the world during your lifetime. That is, what's your unique purpose in life, and how do you want to go about fulfilling that purpose? Practising this discipline involves some honest exploration of your own life experiences and desires and a willingness to take some risks.

Because everything really is structurally connected (Systems Thinking again!), an organisation committed to true learning practices all of the above disciplines in some form, rather than tackling them in isolation. After all, they each reinforce one another, and when they come into alignment, the organisation realises the benefits.

© TEAL Consulting Limited