

Mite monthly tip  
May 2022  
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### **Cultivating a Learning Organization**

Timely and pertinent continuing education is essential for keeping a health organization motivated, nimble and innovative. Learning at the organizational level is required to meet the challenges of working in a complex, changing, oftentimes unpredictable system tackling high-stakes problems. Organizational learning may occur at the level of team, office, department, or division and is defined as a complex process where individuals collectively examine group experiences, create, receive and pass on knowledge, enabling organizations to adapt to a changing work environment. Provision of a clear mission, incentives, and continuing education and training opportunities serve only a portion of the elements needed for learning to happen this way. A solid learning organization requires an underlying foundation of specific building blocks to enable skillful development, acquisition and transmission of knowledge leading to adaptability.

Key points:

- A supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and reinforcing leadership behavior are the foundation of an effective learning organization.
- These elements operate synergistically to promote organizational learning but can be examined and developed separately.
- Useful survey tools have been developed to examine and rate learning at the organizational level.

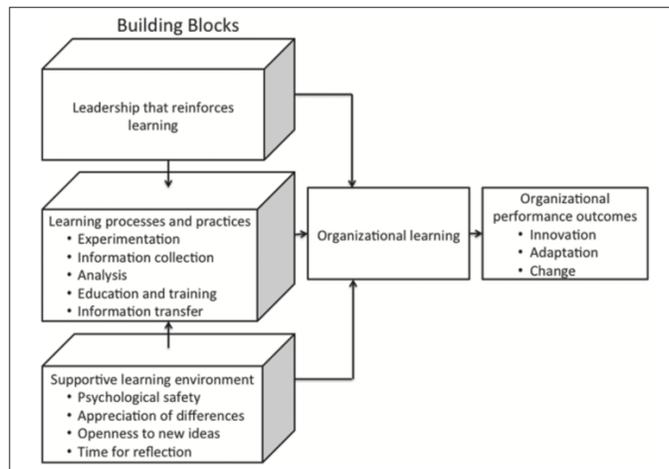
### **The 3 building blocks of an effective learning organization:**

A **supportive learning environment** requires four distinct features. The first is psychological safety. Organization members must feel free to voice their thoughts and opinions, admit mistakes and ask questions without fear of repercussion. The second feature is appreciation of differences. Considering opposing viewpoints can spur on new ideas and innovation. Third is openness to these new ideas to come up with new approaches to problem solving. Lastly, time must be allowed for reflection. It is not enough to put in the hours required and check off tasks. Organization members must be allowed time out to look back on group processes to determine if stated goals have been met and what could be done better next time.

A **concrete learning process and practice** allows an organization to develop, collect and share knowledge between and among groups systematically and efficiently. Experimentation must be encouraged, new approaches and outcomes must be tracked, rigorous examination and interpretation of new problems must be ongoing, education for new and veteran employees must be provided. Finally, sharing of information must be delivered in a systematic way, in all

directions, quickly to those who need-to-know. A robust learning process and practice requires the underpinnings of a supportive learning environment.

Finally, **leadership that reinforces learning** by actively and respectfully listening to members thoughts and opinions, encouraging new ideas and experimentation, placing importance on efficient and transparent knowledge sharing, and allowing time for reflective analysis to support a climate where learning will flourish.



Singer et al., (2012)

### Assessing your learning organization

These 3 building blocks interact and work together to promote organizational learning, but each block and its comprising elements can be examined separately so that organizations may assess the strengths and weaknesses of their learning environment. The **Learning Organization Survey (LOS)** developed in 2008 by Garvin, Edmondson and Gino is a 55-item online diagnostic survey that measures how well your organizational unit functions as a learning organization. Individuals or groups (who average their scores) may compare scores to benchmark data from baseline organizations. Derived from the LOS is the **LOS-27** developed in 2012 by Singer, Moore, Meterko and Williams. Designed for use in the healthcare setting, this survey distills the LOS into a 27-item survey with wording relevant to healthcare organization members. Interestingly, studies using these tools have revealed marked variance among teams within a single organization and even in a single department.

As educators we know the significant amount of time spent in quality improvement, curriculum development and rollout for our teams and departments. Periodic assessment of our organization learning environment would aid in ensuring our efforts are effective and sustainable, team members remain energized and adaptable, and we continue to deliver up-to-date and safe patient care.

References:

Garvin, D., Edmondson, A. C., & Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization? *Harvard Business Review*, 86(3), 109-116.

Singer, S.J., Moore, S. C., Meterko, M., & Williams, S. (2012). Development of a short-form learning organization survey: The LOS-27. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 69(4), 432-459.

To see LOS-27 in action:

Edmondson, A. C., Higgins, M., Singer, S. & Weiner, J. (2016). Understanding psychological safety in health care and education organizations: a comparative perspective. *Research in Human Development*, 13, 65-83.

Multiple choice questions:

1. The three building blocks for a healthy learning organization are:

- a) A clear mission, adequate learning opportunities, appropriate incentives
- b) Supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes, reinforcing leadership
- c) A clear mission, supportive learning environment, appropriate incentives
- d) Supportive learning environment, adequate learning opportunities, reinforcing leadership

2. Leadership can support effective organizational learning by:

- a) Entertaining alternative viewpoints
- b) Allowing for experimentation and risk taking
- c) Constructively reflecting on mistakes
- d) All of the above

3. The LOS is only valid for:

- a) Individual organization members to assess their learning environment
- b) Organizational units to assess their learning environment
- c) Only for organization-wide assessment of its learning environment
- d) Individuals or any unit size within an organization to assess their learning environment