



The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Learning Organization

Contributors: **Edited by:** Larry E. Sullivan

Edited by: Larry E. Sullivan

Book Title: The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Chapter Title: "Learning Organization"

Pub. Date: 2009

Access Date: November 15, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412951432

Online ISBN: 9781412972024

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972024.n1442>

Print page: 288

© 2009 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

An organization that continuously engages in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, abilities, or attitudes to grow, respond to changes in the environment, and improve product or service quality. Learning organizations expand their capacity to create their desired future by means of generative learning, the organizing principle of the system's life and culture. Popularized by Peter Senge (1990), learning organizations are characterized by five "disciplines," or bodies of theory and practice:

- 1.
Personal mastery: the ongoing expansion of individual vision, capacity, proficiency, and competency to realize the results that matter the most
- 2.
Mental models: scrutinizing and challenging deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, and beliefs that influence how individuals understand the world, shape their thoughts, and enact interaction
- 3.
Shared vision: the creation of a genuine, shared image of the future to be constructed together
- 4.
Team learning: engagement in group dialogue as the means to transform individual thinking into collective knowledge in order to mobilize energy, achieve common goals, and draw forth synergetic wisdom and talent
- 5.
Systems thinking: the ability to understand and optimize the forces, dynamics, and inter relationships that shape the behavior of the system

Learning organizations attempt to generate three kinds of knowledge: (1) knowing-why (why individuals perform the work they do); (2) knowing-how (with what skills and expertise individuals go about their work, covering both formal and tacit knowledge); and (3) knowing-whom (the range of relationships individuals hold within and beyond the workplace). When generating organizational knowledge, learning organizations engage people's intrinsic motivation (knowing-why) to support a shared vision and purpose. They incorporate people's skills and ways of interacting at work (knowing-how) into a shared repertoire of practice. They draw on people's social investments (knowing-whom) in each other to create patterns of mutual engagement. Senge contends that the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is an organization's ability to learn faster than its competitors.

Despite disputes in the literature concerning a system's capacity to learn, learning organizations display the properties of distributed cognition. Individuals in relationship actively mold and influence each other's knowledge and reasoning processes, building work epistemology on the basis of what they tell and are told by others. Therefore, individuals in learning organizations are not bound by the limitations of any one person's cognitive capacity or experience. Distributed cognition within learning organizations gives shared meaning to the tasks individuals are enacting and allows them to make collective sense of the processes with which they are engaged.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412972024.n1442>

See also

- [Organization Design](#)
- [Organization Development \(OD\) \(education, public administration\)](#)