

Levels and Loops of the Learning Organisation

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This article is designed to introduce the reader to the concepts of the learning organisation & organisational learning and to explore the role and potential value of Dilts' Levels of Change model (1996) in this context.

Organisational Learning and the Learning Organisation

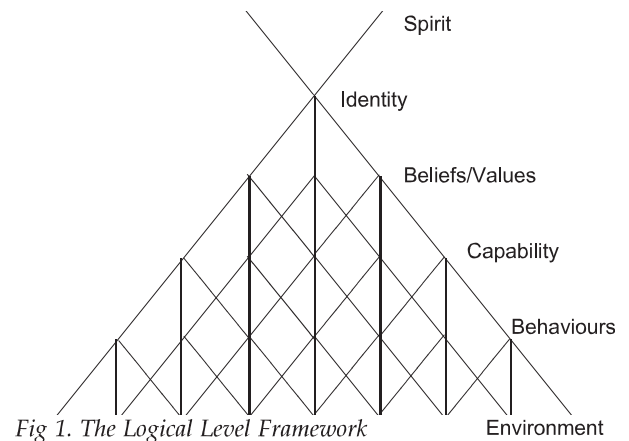
Throughout the literature there appears to be a lack of agreed definitions of the terms 'organisational learning' and 'learning organisation' (e.g. Garvin 1993). Organisational learning is described by Dixon (1992, p29) as referring "to learning at the system rather than the individual level," and that "learning in an organisation must necessarily occur through individuals, but also... that organisational learning is more than the sum of the learning individuals." Does Dixon mean that organisational learning is gestalt or that is a paradox? Argyris (1977, p116) states that "organisational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error" which is also his description of single loop learning. Does that mean that organisational learning can never be double loop? Jones and Hendry (1994) define organisational learning in rather more pragmatic and measurable terms as "the sum total of learning taking place and its impact on the organisation and its activities" (p154).

Senge (1993) describes the learning organisation as "organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire" (p.3) or "an organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (p.14).

It would seem that although linked, the learning organisation is not the same as organisational learning. According to Jones and Hendry (1994) organisational learning is "an aspect of the learning organisation" (p157). If one is an 'aspect' of the other, this would imply a hierarchy of levels.

Levels of the Learning Organisation

Working from the idea of Bateson's 'Levels of Learning'¹, Dilts developed the 'Levels of Change'² model (in his book *Visionary Leadership*, 1996). Change is a key component of the learning organisation and so it would seem the model is worth exploring in the learning context. The model consists of six hierarchical levels comprising of *Spirit* (bigger picture purpose beyond the individual organisation) which is supporting and is supported by *Identity* which is supporting and is supported by *Beliefs and Values* and so on through *Capability*, *Behaviour* and *Environment* (see Fig 1). According to Dilts (1996, p22), one of the principles of the model is that "each level of change involves progressively more of the system... Each level involves different types of processes and interactions that incorporate and operate on information from the level below it".



Perhaps Dilts' model could shed further light on the learning organisation/organisational learning distinction: 'organisational learning' would appear to fit on the level of capability and 'learning organisation' would fit on the level of identity (for example "we are a learning organisation"). Table 1 (below) gives examples of the Levels of Change in the learning and development of organisations.

Table 1. Levels of Change of the Learning Organisation

Level	Organisational Learning & Development	Individual Learning & Development	If not supported by level directly above
Spirit <i>For Whom?</i>	Vision Statements eg.: "Learning to make the world a better place" "Learning to benefit the environment and community"	Transferable skills/knowledge to take outside work to make a better family/ community.	?
Identity <i>Who?</i>	Mission Statements eg.: "We are a learning organisation" "We are developing people" "We are an 'Investors in People' company"	I am a learning, developing self.	Organisation is learning without a shared context, learning for the sake of learning.
Beliefs/Values <i>Why?</i>	Value statements eg.: "We value training and development" "Learning helps us to become more effective/competitive/ profitable" "Developing people is important"	Self belief & confidence: Learning and being able to learn makes me more employable and aid my progress. Learning keeps life fresh and interesting.	L&D Value statements are perceived as empty 'management speak', lip service (manipulation rather than motivation)
Capability <i>How?</i>	Appraisal/performance review leading to learning & development plans (individual and organisational) Effective training, coaching, facilitation on offer. Support from manager before and after learning event. Resources provided. People open to learning.	Improving skills, knowledge, experience in specific areas. Openness to learning.	L&D becomes valueless and aimless. Training and coaching may happen here and there but is not believed in. Appraisal, training etc. seen as a waste of time.

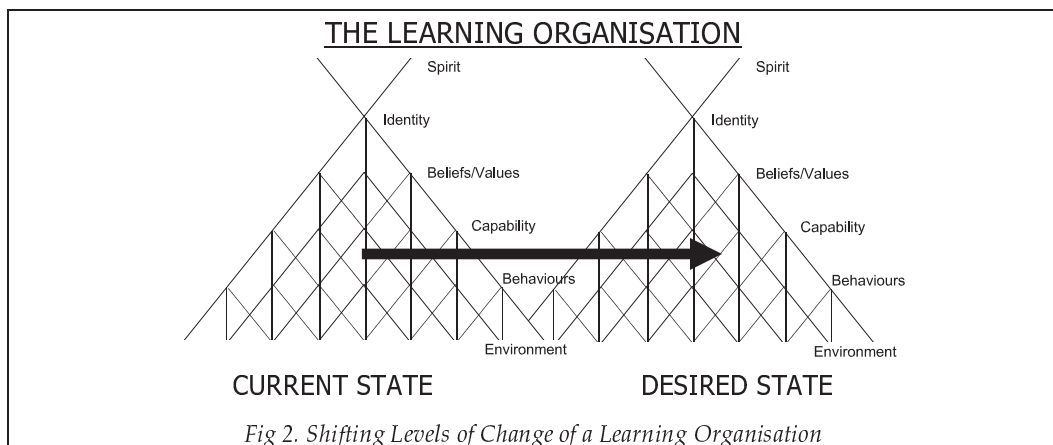
Behaviour <i>What?</i>	People attend/turn up to training/coaching sessions Ground-rules set, people respect each other (eg. "no question is a stupid question")	Attending courses, sessions, reading/listening to relevant material. Asking questions, listening, evaluating, Putting learning into practice.	Behaviours and skills learnt do not embed back in the workplace due to lack of support/resources/ time. People feel as if they have been sent as punishment.
Environment <i>Where/When?</i>	Learning environment (eg. Training room) away from distractions, safe, comfortable, stimulating, refreshments and breaks. Specific time allocated for learning & development	Appealing to individual's learning style, opportunities: to try things out to observe and discuss to draw conclusions and to plan, ... in a safe, comfortable, stimulating environment.	People may not turn up. People may be disruptive or passive/ disengaging/ unwilling to learn

When 'chunked down' in this way using Dilts' Levels of Change, the concept of the learning organisation becomes more practical and realisable. It gives an opportunity to appraise the current situation and then set goals and actions at each level.

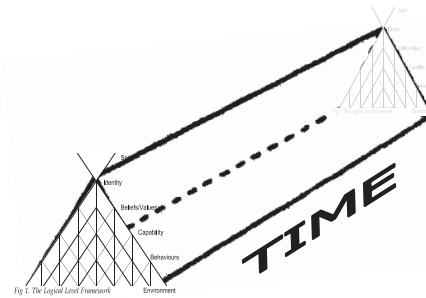
The Learning Organisation... Thing or Process, Goal or Journey?

Tosey (2005) suggests that the learning organisation could be perceived as a mythological thing. It is, at best, a journey but there seems to be no tangible destination. In this sense, it could be argued that term 'learning organisation' is a nominalisation (i.e. an abstract, intangible noun whose meaning is reliant on the mind and interpretation of the beholder). Perhaps we should leave the learning organisation 'denominalised' as a process.

Jones and Hendry (1994) also suggest that the learning organisation is a direction rather than a goal. The author would go further in suggesting that the learning organisation is represented by **all** the organisational Levels of Change moving from current state to desired state. Perhaps the current lack of clarity about defining a learning organisation is due to a lack of well formed outcomes (if it is a direction and not a goal) and also the more abstract 'non measurable' aspects of the higher levels (beliefs/values and identity). Fig 2 proposes a visual representation of a learning organisation using the Levels of Change as a framework.



In figure 2, the change from one state to another suggests that Dilts' levels move through time. This might also be represented as a triangular prism where time ('when?') becomes separated from the level of environment ('where?'):



The Role of Values and Alignment in the Learning Organisation

“Implicit values that are deeply embedded in the culture of an organisation and are reinforced by the behaviour of management can be highly influential, while espoused values that are idealistic and are not reflected in management behaviour may have little or no effect.”

Armstrong (2001 ,p206)

As Armstrong (2001) notes, values need to be believed in and lived to produce results. An organisation may have value statements but if no-one buys into them or acts upon them, they are simply words on paper. Values appear in a variety of organisational models (e.g. Dilts 1996, Waterman et al 1980, Johnson 1988, Armstrong 2001) and are integral to the culture of an organisation.

In order for learning and development to be transferred, it must be seen and felt as important. If it is simply seen as writing on paper, learning and development will not be seen as a priority. Hence it will slip to one side and be regarded as a ‘nice to do, but not essential’. For an organisation to consider itself a learning organisation, learning and development must be truly embraced, valued and applied.

The Levels of Change model can be utilised in determining if there is alignment at the different levels and if not, diagnosing where the misalignment is taking place. Any task, change, project or objective needs to be aligned in order to serve the organisation; so does learning & development. Misalignment can cause interference, conflict and paradox within the organisation (Cheal 2012).

In order for alignment to happen and for values to positively affect transfer of learning, there needs to be organisation-wide clarity and awareness as to what the learning values of the organisation actually are. For more information see the ‘Levels of Change and Loops of Learning’ below.

In practical terms, in order for learning and development to be aligned (and hence to take place):

- The organisation needs to give training opportunities
- Training needs to be timely and relevant
- Managers need to create opportunity for individuals to apply learning, so transfer of learning can take place.

The Levels of Change and the Loops of Learning

The Levels of Change and the Loops of Learning (LCLL) model is a diagrammatic representation of how learning (and hence change) takes place. It could apply to an individual or an organisation, but for this exercise we are looking at an organisation.

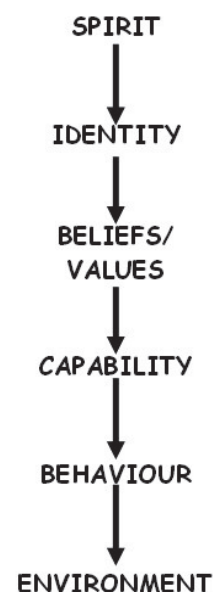
The LCLL model is a dynamic model designed to show the movement necessary for learning to take place. Learning and change require motivation and the model should give the practitioner a tool to prepare and promote such learning and change by helping to show:

- the difference between temporary change and permanent change,
- where and how learning might get blocked.

There are two phases in the LCLL model, *Re-evaluation* and *Revolution*. The first phase is the realisation that change is desired and learning is required; and then motivation is gathered to create the change/learning. The second phase is the actual process of embedding learning (and hence more permanent change).

Phase 1: Re-Evaluation

The Re-evaluation Phase occurs when there is a desire to be different from the current state. It may begin at Spirit, Identity or Beliefs/Values. The desire will tend to be stronger and the learning/change more likely when the process begins higher up the levels. There is then a drive through the other levels down to Environment. Think of it like a six storey building with a water tank at each level. When water comes down from the top floor, there will be a greater pressure at the first floor than if the water came from the second floor. The stronger the pressure, the easier and more successful phase 2 (*Revolution*) is likely to be.



As an example, the levels might be expressed: “The expectations of those we serve are changing (*spirit*) and we want to be the customer’s number one choice (*identity*). It is important to us to be of service (*values*) and so we need to be ready (*capability*) to deliver (*behaviour*) to a 21st century marketplace (*environment*).”

In the context of organisational change, the Re-evaluation phase would be the time for defining, planning, informing, briefing and involving. This phase alone however, without phase 2, will lead only to surface level, short term readiness for change and learning. If this is not followed up quickly by phase two, the motivation will wane and the process will be considered ‘lip service’ and without substance.

Key Questions

Once the desire has been established, there is a flow from top to bottom, where the following questions need to be asked and answered:

Spirit: Who are we here for and how are they changing? How is our purpose changing?

Identity: Who do we want to be? How do we want to be different?

Beliefs/Values: Why do we want to be that? What needs to be more important to us? What beliefs will help us?

Capability: How will we achieve that? What skills/knowledge do we need?

Behaviour: What do we need to do to get those skills?

Environment: Where/when will we do this?

It would also be wise to do an ecology check at each level. For example: “what could be the potential consequences, implications and risks of changing this level and how will we put contingency plans in place to cater for any foreseeable issues?”

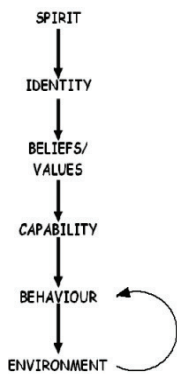
Possible Blocks at Re-evaluation Phase

The learning/change is likely to fail if:

- the desire or will is not really strong enough to drive all the way down to the Environment level,
- the ecology is unsound leading to negative reactions systemically. This could be for example, people/parts resisting or a contradiction created with other parts of the system.

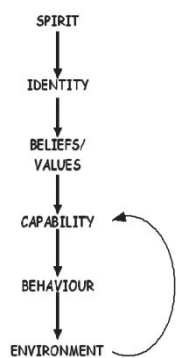
Phase 2: Revolution

The Revolution Phase consists of a number of loops that progress back up the levels. Each loop may need to be repeated a number of times in order for the learning to take place. In order for the looping to take place, there needs to be some motivation. This motivation usually comes from a sense of purpose, values, benefits or consequences of not learning. It could be said that the process needs to be driven by the 'higher' levels.



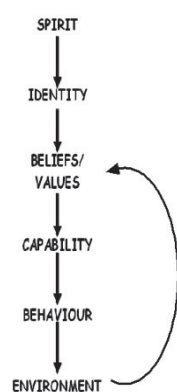
Loop 1: Practicing

- This loop entails action that affects the surroundings in some way. The result of the action provides feedback which reinforces success and allows correction of errors. This stage correlates to 'conscious incompetence'.
- The process of going round this loop is called *practicing*.
- This process can be accelerated by time/opportunity to practice, effective instruction, direction, training/coaching and verbal feedback.



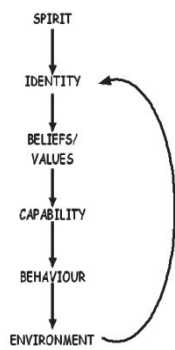
Loop 2: Developing Ability

- This loop entails using the practiced behaviours in such an elegant way that it is now considered a skill. The behaviours now become unconscious, though there is still consciousness of learning. This stage correlates to 'conscious competence'.
- The process of going round this loop is called *developing ability*.
- This process can be accelerated by time/opportunity to develop the ability, management/trainer support, feedback and coaching.



Loop 3: Building Belief

- This loop entails the ability becoming effective enough that the internal belief grows. This may be belief in oneself, the organisation, the learning or the change. The learning also develops true value and becomes a part of the culture. Capability becomes unconscious leading to 'unconscious competence'.
- The process of going round this loop is called *building belief*.
- This process can be accelerated by time/opportunity to build the belief, effective hands off coaching and support.



Loop 4: Integrating

- This loop entails the beliefs and culture embedding to the point where it becomes inseparable from the organisation. The learning/change is no longer considered external as it is part of the system.
- The process of going round this loop is called *integrating*.
- This process can be accelerated by time/opportunity for integration, continued support and encouragement.

This model works for both active/applied/kinaesthetic skill development and passive/visual/auditory knowledge development. Knowledge development still goes through the same loops, where data (environment) becomes information (internal processing/behaviour) becomes knowledge (capability). Knowledge, in this context, would also include learning the unseen/unwritten culture and social rules of an environment. Sometimes, skill learning comes before knowledge learning and sometimes vice versa. This will depend on the individuals/organizations learning styles and metaprograms.

Possible Blocks at Revolution Phase

The learning/change is likely to fail if:

- There is poor training/coaching or lack of support/resources provided,
- There is a negative experience in a loop that is strong enough to halt progress,
- There is a break or too great a delay in a loop.

Conclusion: Real-ising the Learning Organisation

“Yes, that’s all very well but it doesn’t help my particular situation.”

Charles Handy (1993, p.15)

Handy (1993) puts these words into the mouth of a pragmatic manager in response to the academic’s theories. Indeed, a general big picture criticism of the learning organisation literature and concept (e.g. Handy 1993, Senge 1993, Argyris 1977 & 1994) is that it is too general and big picture! Perhaps the very paradox of the learning organisation is that it is a big picture, big chunk concept. This can create abstract theories, jargon and metaphor. Handy’s pragmatic managers may not find any practical use in grand ideas like ‘learning organisations’ if they struggle to apply such concepts to their specific situations. This suggests a need for some small chunk steps of how to get from ‘a’ to ‘b’?

For the 'learning organisation' to become a graspable reality (e.g. for Handy's pragmatic manager), it needs to be chunked down to the level of:

- workable systems,
- 'common sense' attitudes and 'common practice' behaviours,
- knowledge and skills that are relevant, manageable and applicable.

Dilts' model can help to bridge the gap between high level concept and practical action planning. Not only does it give us the opportunity to assess where we are and where we want to be, the model also allows us to explore the alignment between the levels and take appropriate action if necessary.

Notes

1. For more information of Bateson's Levels of Learning, see Hall (2001) and Tosey (2006).
2. The Levels of Change model is a development of Dilts' original Neurological Levels model (published in *Changing Belief Systems with NLP*, 1990). Dilts originally claimed that his model represented logical levels as outlined by Bateson (2000). A true hierarchy of logical levels is where the level above is a category and the level below is the collection of items that fit into that category. For example, the category of transport contains: cars, vans, bicycles, trains etc. Whilst the Neurological Levels model has been criticised for not representing 'true logical levels' (e.g. Hall 2001, Bostic St. Clair & Grinder 2001), it can be extremely useful when used as a tool for exploration and problem resolution, particularly in its developed form as 'Levels of Change' which is not defined in terms of *logical* levels (in this article at least). Whilst I agree with these criticisms, I am still happy to consider the components as *hierarchical levels* (like a hierarchy of criteria) or *layers* (e.g. of concentric circles like Satir's 'Self Mandala' – in Satir et al 1991).

Biography

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a master trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and NLT, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP. He is also a licensed EI practitioner.

He is the author of *'Solving Impossible Problems: Working Through Tensions and Paradox in Business'* and co-author of *'The Model Presenter: Developing Excellence in Presenting and Training'*.

Joe is a co-founder of the Positive School of Intrinsic Neuro-Linguistic Psychology (www.psinlp.com) and a partner in the GWiz Learning Partnership (www.gwiztraining.com), working as a Management & Organisational Development Specialist.

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