

A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

*In times of drastic change, it is the **learners** who inherit the future. The **learned** usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists. (author unknown)*

It would seem obvious that an institution whose mission is effective teaching and learning should automatically be a learning organization. In our vision we declare ourselves to be a learning organization so we must be one. But, are we really? Many colleges are not.

This white paper provides background information on what is a learning organization, discusses the 3 different issues of strategic conversations, instruction, and diversity in the context of a learning organization, and introduces the concepts of new science and leadership, systems self-organization, and chaos and their effect in changing roles of individuals and the behavior of the organization. The following questions are addressed:

1.) What is a learning organization?

- a. What are the activities of a learning organization?
- b. Why build a learning organization?
- c. What are the 5 disciplines?
- d. What are the attributes of a learning organization?

2.) What are some examples of a learning organization within Maricopa?

- a. How do strategic conversations contribute?
- b. How does the issue of diversity relate to a learning organization?
- c. Is there an instructional example?

3.) How does Maricopa self-organize itself and practice new leadership?

- a. What skill sets will individuals need to have?
- b. How do we identify ourselves as learners in a learning organization?

4.) How do we assess our organization as a learning organization?

WHAT IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

David Garvin in the August 1993 Harvard Business Review defines a learning organization as "an *organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.* "

The important component of this definition is the requirement that change occur in the way work gets done. This test rules out a number of obvious candidates such as colleges. We in colleges have been successful in creating knowledge (research) and transferring knowledge (teaching) but have not been successful in applying that knowledge to our own activities.

Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, described a learning organization as "*a place where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn.*"

This definition is very idyllic and abstract. Its focus is on philosophical grand scheme. It is very desirable but what we must do to get there is unanswered.

Ross, Smith, Roberts and Kleiner advocate this definition. *"Learning in an organization means the continuous testing of experience, and the transformation of that experience into knowledge- accessible to the whole organization, and relevant to its core purpose."*

These authors suggest a checklist from this definition.

1. Are you willing to examine and challenge your sacred cows?
2. What kinds of structures have you designed for this testing?
3. When people raise potentially negative information, do you shoot the messenger?
4. Does your organization show capabilities it didn't have before?
5. Do you feel as if what you know is qualitatively different - "value-added" from the data you took in?
6. Is the knowledge accessible to all of the organization's members?

(Ross, Smith, Roberts, Kleiner, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p 49.)

1.a. ACTIVITIES OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

1. Systematic problem solving: thinking with systems theory; insisting on data rather than assumptions; using statistical tools
2. Experimentation with new approaches: ensure steady flow of new ideas; incentives for risk taking; demonstration projects
3. Learning from their own experiences and past history: recognition of the value of productive failure instead of unproductive success
4. Learning from the experiences and best practices of others: enthusiastic borrowing
5. Transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization: reports, tours, personnel rotation programs, training programs

(David Garvin, "Building a Learning Organization", *Harvard Business Review*, Aug. 1993, pp. 78-90.)

1.b. REASONS TO BUILD A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

1. Because we want superior performance
2. To improve quality
3. For customers
4. For competitive advantage
5. For an energized, committed workforce
6. To manage change
7. For the truth
8. Because the times demand it
9. Because we recognize our interdependence

10. Because we want it

(The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, p 9-12)

1.c. THE FIVE DISCIPLINES

"The core of learning organization work is based upon five "learning disciplines" - lifelong programs of study and practice:

1. **Personal mastery**- learning to expand our personal capacity to create results we most desire and creating an organizational environment which encourages all its members to develop themselves toward goals and purposes they choose.
2. **Mental Models**- reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world, and seeing how they shape our actions and decisions.
3. **Shared Vision**- building a sense of commitment in a group, by developing shared images of the future we seek to create, and the principles and guiding practices by which we hope to get there.
4. **Team Learning**- transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents.
5. **Systems Thinking**- a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world.

(Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, pp. 6-7)

1.d. ATTRIBUTES OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

William O'Brien, former CEO of the Hanover Insurance Company describes 4 attributes that are necessary to cope with change.

1. "The first is learning how to **disperse power** on an orderly, non chaotic basis. Right now the word "empowerment" is a very powerful buzzword. It's also very dangerous. Just granting power, with out some method of discipline and order that comes out of a command-and-control bureaucracy, produces chaos. We have to learn to disperse power so self-discipline can largely replace imposed discipline. That immerses us in the area of culture; replacing the bureaucracy with aspirations, values, and visions.
2. The second attribute of winning companies will be **systemic understanding**....We are good at the type of problem which lend itself to a scientific solution and reductionistic thinking. We are absolutely illiterate in subjects that require us to understand systems and interrelationships.
3. The third attribute that twenty-first companies will need is **conversation**. This is the single greatest tool in your organization- more important than computers or sophisticated research. We are good at small talk....but when we face contentious issues-- when there are feelings about rights, or when two worthwhile principles come into conflict with one another -- we have so many defense mechanisms that impede

communications that we are absolutely terrible.

4. Finally, under our old system of governance, one could lead by mandate. If you had the ability to climb the ladder, gain power, and then control that power, you could enforce these changes in attributes. But the forthcoming kind of company is going to require **voluntary followership**. Most of our leaders don't think in terms of getting voluntary followers; they think in terms of control."

(William O'Brien, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, pp. 13-14.)

EXAMPLES WITHIN MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGES:

2.a THE ROLE OF "STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS"

Organizations learn. Just like individual people, organizations **sense** circumstances within their environment and they **respond**. They **observe** the results of their responses and **remember** the results, along with information gathered from other sources, for reference in designing future responses. This process of sensing, responding, and observing/remembering goes largely unnoticed by the individuals working within the organization due to the complexity of the "anatomy" of organizations. But consciously or not, effectively or not, all organizations are doing these activities over and over. In studying the concept of learning organizations we seek the tools and methodologies that will help an organization learn consciously and proactively in pursuit of its goals.

One of these tools is dialogue. The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek "dialogos". "Logos" meaning "the meaning of the word" and "Dia" meaning "through". In a learning organization, our purpose for dialogue is to let the *meaning of our words* permeate *through* the group, or, to develop fully-shared, even synergistic understanding of important information, experiences, goals, etc. among **all** the people involved. Why is this so? Because it is the people that breath the life into the organization, they **do** the sensing, responding, observing and remembering. An organization is nothing more than the actions, interactions, and resultant artifacts, of the people that participate. When an organization learns, it is the people who do the learning. Learning organization experts believe that if the organization is going to move decisively toward its vision it needs to develop a unique "consciousness" designed for the purpose. But this consciousness can only exist in the collective consciousness of the people, therefore dialogue is necessary to develop an organizational "consciousness" that is proactive and effective.

Without shared understanding of information we will sense the environment differently, causing confusion. Without shared understanding of experiences we will advocate different responses, causing conflict. Without shared understanding of observations we will remember different outcomes, exacerbating the confusion and conflict. Dialogue is people coming together to share and analyze the information, ideas, and paradigms of their organization for the purpose of improving *the organization's* ability to sense, respond, observe/remember; for the purpose of improving *the organization's* capability to learn. In The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook Bill Isaacs explains it this way:

"Dialogue is not merely a set of techniques for improving organizations, enhancing communications, building consensus, or solving problems. It is based on the principle that conception and implementation are intimately linked, with a core of common meaning. During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together-not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together."

(Issacs, William, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook)

Our Strategic Conversations indeed are Maricopa people coming together to share and analyze information, ideas and paradigms that are of strategic importance to our organization. These sorts of discussions generally lead to mutual understanding, and when we do a good job, truly common understanding.

Some may ask, "But what about the fact that nothing really happens as a result of the Strategic Conversations?" Ironically, that's sort of what we need. David Bohm, physicist and dialogue theorist claims dialogue does not need an immediate purpose.

Organizational learning actually happens in the innumerable interactions of the people and manifests itself in their equally innumerable workplace activities. If 50 people at a Strategic Conversation all learn one thing, how often will that unit of learning actually affect their actions? How big an effect will it probably have even then? Small, to be sure. But dialogue's nature, small increments of learning happening in many places, creating effects in even more places, is generally not in the realm of short-term tangible change. It is in the realm of systemic and evolutionary change.

Does this mean we shouldn't have bothered to learn from/with each other? No, it means that we need to incorporate dialogue into our daily work and understand that any one dialogue usually will not make an immediately discernible difference. (See Learning and the New Science by Margaret Wheatley for more on organizations as complex systems and the nature and effects of the "information environment".)

Another concern commonly arises about dialogue. Sometimes in Strategic Conversations it may feel like we are just "sharing our ignorance". After all, we are discussing complicated subjects and may or may not have any "real experts" in the room to guide us. But this too is natural. While dialogue, in the learning organization context, may have been happening here and there around Maricopa for years, creating it "on demand" is a new skill we are learning. We want to be a consciously and proactively learning organization. Since we have not been doing it very long we are not very good at it yet. We Maricopans understand that a student in our classrooms will learn better if they know how they learn. As employees come to understand that Maricopa can't learn effectively without that same knowledge, the progress will accelerate.

2.b. DIVERSITY AND THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The heart of learning organizations is the concept of "communities of commitment." The current U.S. culture promotes fragmentation of thoughts and detachment of individuals from the community. To the contrary, the building of a learning organization is not an individual task, but a systems approach that brings the parts (people) together to create alternative ways of working and living together. Capturing the strengths of diverse people is natural for a learning organization. The management of diversity must become a strategic issue.

The two Maricopa goals of valuing diversity by believing that no one is more important than another, each is important in a unique way, and of developing a quality approach to its services are powerful momentums. When these two forces come together, major change will come to Maricopa. A learning organization is the framework on which both these forces can be energized and strengthened.

The learning organization of the future will incorporate diversity into its internal processes by encouraging the expression of different point of views. Diversity of experience , education, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, expertise, and opinion can aid any organization in attempting to understand students, customers, competitors, and suppliers, anticipate future trends, and provide a challenging workplace for the employees. If the requisite level of diversity does not exist or is not effectively managed, the organization will be unable to adapt to a rapidly changing, external environment.

(Heil, Parker, Tate, Leadership and the Customer Revolution, 1994, pp. 92-93)

The quality concept of exceeding the needs of your customers comes into consideration when discussing diversity. The changing demographics of the students and the generational differences between the students and faculty require that an organization learn about its "customers." If the Maricopa organization fails to learn from the diversity of its internal and external customers, the future will be troubled.

A learning organization enables contributions from the people by:

- discovering multiple ways to contribute
- utilizing diversity of background and perspective
- recognizing unique roles
- providing support for the whole person

(Brown, Juanita and Issacs, David, "Building Community, Building Commitment: Learning Organization in a Democratic Society", Building Learning Organizations Conference Handbook, 1994, pp. 387.)

An upcoming honors speaker and noted author, Fritjof Capra remarks about the connection between diversity and a learning organization, *"Diversity means many different relationships, many different approaches to the same problem. A diverse community is a resilient community, capable of adapting easily to changing situations. Accordingly, ecomanagement includes the conscious effort to include*

representatives from different interest groups, contradictory tendencies, different cultural backgrounds, etc., in the process of reflection and decision making. ...All living systems develop, and all development is learning. Therefore a sustainable community is always a learning community; a community which continually changes, develops, and learns."

(Capra, Fitjof, "Sustainable Communities: A Management Challenge", Building Learning Organizations Conference Handbook, 1994, pp. 46.)

A good example of making diversity a strength is found in an office furniture company. Michele Hunt, vice president of quality and people development at Herman Miller Co. commented. *"At Herman Miller we approached diversity through a vision of quality, not through a sense of social responsibility or federal mandate.... The concept of diversity took precedence at Herman Miller because we recognized we could never get to high performance participation without valuing the uniqueness that each person brought to the organization. We knew that this was not possible without a specific effort both to understand diversity, and to help people work together more effectively. For most of the participants, the process has been an enlightening, even life-changing experience. We have discovered that the teams which work best together are those who have struggled to appreciate each other."*

(Hunt, Michele, "Building an Organization that Recognizes Everyone's Uniqueness", The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, pp. 417-418)

2.c. INSTRUCTIONAL EXAMPLE: SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems Thinking is the fifth discipline of the learning organization. Laura Helminski, Reading, English faculty member at Rio Salado Community has explored the use of Systems Thinking for the improvement of instruction. Conclusions she reached in her report Research Project: Exploring a Systems Approach to Continuous Quality Improvement of Instruction are as follows:

1) Discussions in Systems Thinking cause us to get out of and beyond conversations that we have been having for quite awhile. In several cases, we stopped bringing up the same issues we have heard ourselves complain about for many semesters, and gained a clear view of what we were all actually talking about. We didn't actually resolve anything - yet. But we now feel we are making forward progress in our conversations and in our work improvement.

2) Knowledge of Systems Thinking definitely broadens a person's frame of reference, and helps us understand each other better. Many of the faculty and staff are intrigued by the 'binocular' perspective - understanding the big picture and the details, maybe for the first time. And, having the data to understand the 'why' of many processes and decisions helps many individuals. One staff member said that for the first time she could really see her role in the system, and that she felt more important, more likely to speak up, and more likely to take more responsibility for doing her work as effectively as possible.....

3) The value of a system diagram could be that it shows that people do affect the college system - that they can and do make a difference. (This kind of comment was made several time.) This is an important realization; when this is understood there might be fewer cases of snap judgments and limited decisions. Decisions and individual responsibility might be better thought through. People would do a better job, and have more self-esteem.

4) Applying the knowledge and tools of Systems Thinking after initial implementation of TQM/CQI appears to be a very logical and important step. This would be important to every member of the staff, not just the administration. Then the college could make greater strides in becoming a learning organization, and in meeting its Vision and Mission.

5) Knowledge of Systems Thinking and increased skills in sharing mental models should enable the college to move from strategic conversations (which often stay on the theoretical or abstract level) to the concrete levels of tactical and action plans. In the past, I felt we did well in strategic planning-and in specific process improvement. But the area in between, and the connections, were not always clearly understood. Systems Thinking provides a vehicle for this.

6) Many assessments of the college culture show effective levels of communication within existing departments, and an increasing level of communication within teams. However, it is important to value and increase the communication between these groups. There is a growing interest across the country in building skills in "dialoguing", so that people can communicate more clearly. I believe we have to *value* this communication, and an understanding of where our departments and our teams fit in the system would help this become more important. Therefore, knowledge and skills in Systems Thinking can increase the effectiveness of dialogues.

(Laura Helminski, Exploring a Systems Approach to Continuous Quality Improvement of Instruction, pp. 25-28)

"Between now and the year 2020, learning at the individual and organizational levels must be a distinctive competence of our corporation. In these times of accelerating change and uncertainty, we must be able to anticipate what we will need to know and then teach and learn it faster and better than any other corporation on earth."

Motorola University Board of Directors
LEADERSHIP, CHAOS, INDIVIDUAL ROLES

The learning organization profoundly effects the individuals employed in it and several questions arise. What is the responsibility of the individual and the organization to the time and commitment to learning activities? What individual competencies are need for the future? How do you get those competencies? What is the trainability and adaptability of employees? What are the consequences of discomfort, fear, and

chaos? What is the role of employee groups? Are job descriptions and classifications still valid? What will be the rewards, recognitions and incentives for individuals?

Margaret Wheatley introduces several relationship-based questions. How do we get people to work well together? How do we honor and benefit from diversity? How do we get teams to work together quickly and efficiently? How do we resolve conflicts? Leadership is dependent upon respect for the complex network of people who contribute to the organization. The web of the universe is now being felt in our work lives.

Margaret Wheatley believes that the current movement toward participation and collaboration in the workplace through the use of teams and quality principles is rooted in the new science. Physicists have described a participatory universe. The new focus on relationships within management follows science. In fact, leadership in organization is dependent upon the relationships.

(Wheatley, Margaret, Leadership and the New Science, pp. 139-151)

Fritjof Capra and two Benedictine monks explain the changes in shifting from our traditional linear thinking to the new form of systems thinking. They suggest that we must see things as processes rather than structures. For example a tree is not an object, but an expression of processes, such as photosynthesis, which connect the sun and the earth. The same thinking applies to our jobs, our organizations, and ourselves.

(Capra, Fritjof, Steindl-Rast, Madison, Thomas, Belonging to the Universe, 1991)

Theories and discussions from quantum physics, the new science, chaos, etc. create new ways of thinking about organizational design. They can help us evaluate current management practices, guide us through the fads, and direct us to deeper understandings.

Important roles for people within a learning organization include:

1. Top leaders and managers serve as learning roles models by sharing their own learning goals and by encouraging others to learn. They also recognize the need for individual learning for all levels of employees.
2. Individual employees accept responsibility for their own careers and their own personal learning. They do not wait to be taught nor expect the organization to provide career paths.
3. Learning and personal growth are actively encouraged and rewarded. There are incentives for individuals to stretch their abilities.
4. The "not invented here" syndrome is not practiced by individuals. There is a constant scanning of the internal and external environment for new ideas and trends that will lead to improvement.
5. Employees are held accountable for their performance and excellence is rewarded.
6. Procedures and policies are in place to ensure ongoing and timely reevaluation of changing job skill sets and requirements. Job descriptions and job requirements are examined regularly to accurately reflect the

work being performed or skill sets required.

(Wick, Calhoun and Leon, Lu Stanton, The Learning Edge, McGraw-Hill, 1993)

3.a. SKILL SETS NEEDED BY INDIVIDUALS

Jennifer James, cultural anthropologist has identified the skill sets for the 21st century mind. In a keynote address at the CAUSE conference on November 30, 1994, she described the following:

1. Ability to understand the culture of the organization
2. Ability to let go of old myths
3. Ability to notice new patterns- language as an indicator
 - multitasking
 - miniaturization
 - short-term memory overload
 - low level depression and increasingly angry culture
 - changes of speed
4. Ability to develop a clear perspective/ open perspective
 - ability to relax
 - sense of humor - ability to laugh
 - knowing your history
 - insulate hot buttons and fears
 - ability to scan for information
 - pretend you are an anthropologist and examine what leaders reward, evaluate, and control; what they are paying attention to; what are they measuring
5. Ability to generate energy with coaching and building self-esteem; ability to bring energy into a room
6. Ability to learn forever
7. Ability to own your own career
8. Ability to create "safe" environment for others
9. Ability to see what's coming and what's leaving so you can make choices faster; faster response time

"In the early 20th century, philosopher and scientist Otto Neurath envisioned scientists as sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start from the bottom... They must make use of some drifting timber of the old structure---but they cannot put the ship in dock to start from scratch.

During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves."

"This is a wonderful metaphor for the challenge we face in a world of ever-accelerating change. We must learn about complex systems-- which have grown increasingly dangerous-- all the while living in the midst of these systems."

(John Sterman, The Systems Thinker, Jan. 1995, p. 1)

3.b. HOW DO WE ASSESS OURSELVES AS LEARNERS?

Directions: Place a check mark in the box next to each "true" statement.

As an individual:

- I deliberately seek out learning opportunities rather than waiting to be taught.
- I recognize the power of learning through work experience.
- I believe I am responsible for my own career and for developing my own career opportunities.
- I believe I am accountable for my own development.
- I view my education as a continuous, lifelong endeavor.
- I intentionally decide what I need to learn

I have learning goals designed to:

- ___ enhance my current work assignment
- ___ prepare me for future assignments
- ___ enhance the goals of my department and MCCCDC
- ___ improve my people and leadership skills
- ___ help my department/college meet student needs
- ___ keep me on the learning edge of my profession
- ___ help me adapt to a changing work environment.
- ___ I am proactive in seeking ways to improve what I do.
- ___ I know what new competencies I will need to acquire in the next 2 years and have an active plan to master these competencies.
- ___ I enjoy learning new things.

(Wick, Calhoun and Leon, Lu Stanton, The Learning Edge, McGraw-Hill, 1993)

HOW DO WE ASSESS OUR ORGANIZATION?

My Dept. My College MCCCDC

Leader has a clear vision ___ ___ ___

Leader's vision is clearly communicated ___ ___ ___

Leader is admired by employees ___ ___ ___

Leaders "walk the talk" when it comes ___ ___ ___
to organizational learning.

There is a clear plan to transform ___ ___ ___
our vision into reality

We effectively measure our processes, ___ ___ ___
progress and results.

Results of our metrics are shared ___ ___ ___
rapidly and widely.

External and internal customer re- ___ ___ ___
quirements are clearly understood.

We routinely learn from "best practices ___ ___ ___

of our competitors or colleagues
locally and nationwide.

We avoid the problem of "not invented
here" by using the good ideas of
others. ___ ___ ___

We rapidly identify a "best practice"
in one part of the organization and
share it so it can be used by
another part of the organization. ___ ___ ___

We seek to help employees identify
changing needs in the work place
and provide learning opportunities to
meet these needs. ___ ___ ___

The training we do is actively sup-
ported by the work environment. ___ ___ ___

We often accept challenges even when
we are not sure how to meet them. ___ ___ ___

We are inventive in how we meet our
challenges. ___ ___ ___

We hold people accountable. ___ ___ ___

We do not punish "mistakes." ___ ___ ___

HOW DO WE ASSESS OUR ORGANIZATION? (Continued)

My Dept. My College MCCCDC

We are a "make it happen" organiza-
tion. We have a bias toward
action and take pride in our
accomplishments. ___ ___ ___

We find work fun. ___ ___ ___

Learning is planned and purposeful ___ ___ ___

rather than accidental.

Personal growth is encouraged and rewarded. ___ ___ ___

Leaders serve as learning role models. ___ ___ ___

We provide challenging jobs that stretch employee abilities. ___ ___ ___

People show a passion for personal and organizational growth. ___ ___ ___

We are flexible in making organizational changes that reflect changing job skill sets and requirements. ___ ___ ___

(Wick, Calhoun and Leon, Lu Stanton, The Learning Edge, McGraw-Hill, 1993)

"We often practice a reverse belief - that to maintain our identity, our individuality, we must protect ourselves from the demands of external forces. We tend to think that isolation and clear boundaries are the best way to maintain individuality. But in a world of self-organizing structures, we learn that useful boundaries develop through openness to the environment."

(Wheatley, Margaret, Leadership and the New Science, pp. 92-93)