

LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS AND CHANGE: WHEN LEARNING MATTERS

Debbie Castle

“What would happen if, instead of looking to people for leadership, we looked to the process of learning? With learning as our leader, our perceptions of ourselves, our organizations and the world around us change. New horizons are glimpsed and the future unfolds naturally; curiosity shifts our inner dialogue and inquiry leads to living models of equity and wholeness. Learning is our leader.”ⁱ

Debbie Castle and Judy Johnson

In 2005, I was asked by Coady International Institute to design a course in organizational learning. Having worked as a consultant on organizational renewal projects throughout Atlantic Canada and the world, I jumped at the chance to share what I had been learning practically for 15 years with a group of development practitioners interested in the same. I was also interested in seeing what could be created that would practically help people learn about prioritizing and fostering learning for its own sake and that of their community. In civil society organizations as in public and private entities, work is the priority. The daily demands of the job become routine, with no time for reflecting on whether we’re doing the right things right, for all the right reasons. This is true even in workplaces that nurture pilot projects — mistakes are not well tolerated or understood, and innovations are seen as a rejection of the status quo.

Learning Organizations and Change (LOC) was a 15-day intensive certificate, designed to guide development practitioners in determining their sources of strength and stability during times of change. Strengths are assets that may be transformed into strategic action for ongoing organizational renewal, relevance and resilience. It took several months to design the first year’s version in 2008, sharing ideas from our experience and creating an experiential, participatory course based on the values of cooperation and respect. Over the years I cofacilitated the course, first with Venkatesh Balakrishna (Honourary President, Community-Based

Rehabilitation Global Network), then Pauline MacIntosh (Senior Program Staff, Extension Department, St. Francis Xavier University), and Darren C. Brown (strategic facilitation, learning and change facilitator), whose voices are heard in this essay. We redesigned annually to adjust to the interests of participants. During this 10-year history, we aspired to create effective ways to shift organizational culture toward relevancy and sustainability in a constantly evolving learning environment.

To do this, we stepped back each year to consider what we were learning from our practice and what we would do differently in the course. We had lots of information to work with from previous LOCs — daily assessments, overall evaluations, post-course input from graduates, and big picture themes from the Coady's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning unit. Over the years seven key elements emerged as integral to delivering an effective LOC course. Described below, they are integrity, process, knowledge, newness, experience of others, diversity and ownership.

Integrity

Learning is the primary focus of a learning organization and it became the primary practice applied to anything and everything that happened in or outside the LOC classroom. The goals of the course were:

- Building personal mastery as the basis of leadership to facilitate others through change;
- Learning how to learn collaboratively and help others learn in complex organizational situations;
- Identifying strategies to alleviate barriers to learning within organizational structures and cultures;
- Designing dynamic organizational strategies for facilitating, documenting and sharing organizational experience and knowledge (best practices, knowledge management).

We couldn't just talk about how learning happened in organizations. We exposed ourselves to collective learning in the classroom and residence life and learned to learn together. The intention of LOC was to acquire knowledge based on experience to support practical application of learning organization principles beyond the classroom to family, associations, workplace, and society at large.

From our experience, it seemed many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were losing their integrity — their actions no longer reflected the passion and purpose for which they had originally been formed. They had grown too large, or suffered the tyranny of the donor dilemma of doing things to get funding, rather than acquiring funding to support their purpose. Since the key purpose of many NGOs is to reduce or eliminate

ⁱ Castle, D. And Johnson, J. (2018). When Learning Leads. International AI Journal: Spring 2018.