

125th Anniversary Review: The importance of learning

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Learning has been at the heart of mankind's advances from 'hunter gatherer' to 'organized' and continues to be at the core of the development of our civilization. Learning takes many forms – we can learn by observation and by demonstration and we can learn from outcomes and from deliberate experimentation. Acquired knowledge is preserved and new knowledge added 'to the bank' through the written word and through the wisdom of individuals. Knowledge underpins how and why we do things and forms the basis of developing new ideas. If knowledge is not shared and then acquired by individuals, then those individuals will be at a competitive disadvantage to their peers. Organizations that develop and nurture their knowledge pool will demonstrate superior performance and engender a more innovative and dynamic working environment. Copyright © 2012 The Institute of Brewing & Distilling

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Mankind has always learnt and retained learning. We are not alone – this is a fundamental of evolution, where outcomes, positive or negative, determine future behaviour. Learning moves from generation to generation, through nature (acquired behavioural characteristics) or through nurture, where positive behaviours are demonstrated (taught) by one generation to the next.

Learning is then extended by each successive generation through new thoughts, planned experimentation, observation or accidental experimentation. Was the wheel invented through an innovative 'moment of vision' or by gradual observation of the natural world? Of course the ability of mankind to record everything that has been learnt is known to be fragile – or we would know the answer to the 'wheel conundrum'. Our forefathers recorded more through retained personal 'wisdom' than through the written form or word – but our cave-dwelling ancestors used pictorial records to pass on knowledge to future generations – and in fact early written records are all symbol-based.

In summary, learning is therefore about developing behaviours that will have positive outcomes and minimizing behaviours that will have negative outcomes. Immediately one can see how relevant this is to our lives and our workplaces. In a competitive global environment, then, the retention of acquired knowledge and the development of new knowledge will equip an individual or a business enterprise with tangible advantages – this mirrors the reality of the living world and I refer the reader to *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin (1), which articulates this rather better than I can.

In the context of a working environment, though, we should explore how this superior 'knowledge bank' is utilized to deliver superior individual and collective performance. This alone is a key point – the organizational capability becomes a sum of the individual capability – in fact often far more than the sum, in that these synergistic enhancements take place when the organization acts as a collective. It is a fact that, even if the depth of knowledge is not increased, the more people who have an item of knowledge, then the better the overall performance. This is how societies naturally work – individual learning communicated and learnt across a co-operating group will benefit the individual and the group. The concept of co-operation is important.

Dysfunctional organizations are ones where knowledge is considered to be a hierarchical benefit – enlightened ones recognize that sharing and passing knowledge down and across the organization through example, coaching and leadership is the winning behaviour. Perhaps it is not just about what you know, but how many of your colleagues also know.

Knowledge acquisition is fundamental to the vision of the Institute of Brewing and Distilling (IBD) and informs our drive to effectively disseminate knowledge and to encourage individuals and organizations to adopt learning as a keystone of their personal and corporate development.

The IBD Mission statement is as follows:

The advancement of education and professional development in the science and technology of brewing, distilling and related industries. (2)

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Give a man a pint of beer and he will drink it. But teach a man to brew, and he will rule the world. (Anonymous)

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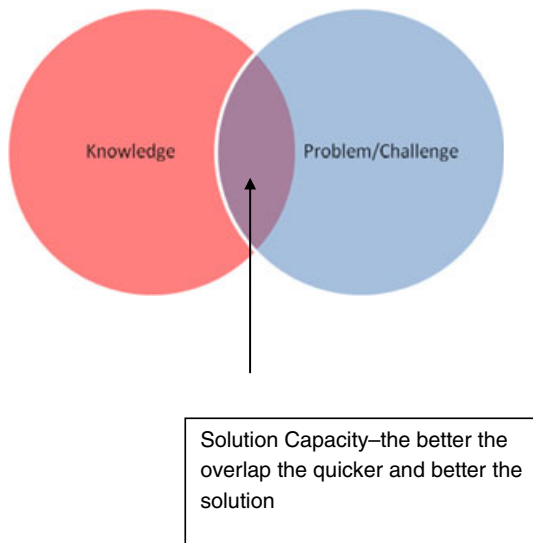


Figure 1. Solution capacity.

Figure 1 attempts to articulate how knowledge impacts on outcomes.

The more knowledge, and the better knowledge is disseminated within an organization, then the better the outcomes. A well-known problem solving tool is the '5 whys?' – a simple but elegant tool (3):

A production problem has been encountered – perhaps the results of routine microbiological checks have deteriorated.
 Why?
 Well it could be x, y or z that caused it.
 Why?
 Etc.

Now of course, if we have a very fast and intelligent human 'chip' embedded within our 'learning organization', then the outputs from the '5 whys' will be quick and accurate, and possibly innovative to boot. Imagine the issue is 'total package oxygen', which was out of spec on the last check – would you like the filler operator/technician to be analysing that result for too long? Two possible unwanted reactions are 'well it's not that important so keep going' or 'not sure what to do, so stop the filler', whereas in a learning organization, rapid corrective action based on acquired knowledge would be expected.

Put simply, do the responsible people have the knowledge to manage the unexpected, the unusual – and quite frankly often the unwelcome? Dealing with the unwelcome is often the biggest challenge and one that requires an organization to act quickly and to have the capacity to make the 'right decisions' – again those with an embedded learning culture cope better with the 'unwelcome' and the implementation of related compensating decisions.

In a seminal publication, *A Toolkit for a Learning Organization*, Pearn collated the framework for delivery of a 'learning organization' (4,5). Within the framework, a key exercise is to review the organizational status – much as a simple SWOT model might do. This model, with two axes, asks the following:

- How good is my organization at learning?
- What evidence do we have that learning capability is already in place?

- How willing is my organization to learn?
- What evidence do we have of a recognition of the importance of learning?

There are many possible outputs but all sit within the four quadrants in Fig. 2.

- Bottom-left quadrant with low scores on both axes – organization stuck.
- Bottom-right quadrant – organization wants to progress.
- Top-left quadrant - organization has untapped potential.
- Top-right quadrant – organization is a learning organization.

What are the characteristics of a learning organization?

- It has a clear commitment to develop all employees supported by appropriate learning and review mechanisms.
- It regularly reviews the training and development needs of all employees.
- It takes action to train and develop individuals on recruitment and throughout their employment.
- It evaluates the investment in training and development to assess achievement and improve future effectiveness.
- It takes every opportunity to learn from experience at the individual, group and corporate level.

Equally a learning organization would not exhibit certain other features – these include the following:

- 'Command and control' as the dominant management method.
- The assumption that past success is the key to future success.
- The view that 'new blood' is essential in order to produce adaptive change within the organization in the belief that the established workforce is 'too old to learn'.
- The belief that advanced information and manufacturing technologies are sufficient to guarantee desired quality and output levels.

Pearn (6) gave the following as the working definition of a learning organization.

- 'A learning organization places high value on individual and organization learning as a prime asset'.



Figure 2. Learning states of an organization.

- It is working towards full utilization of all individual and group potential for learning and adapting in the interests of meeting (setting and reviewing) organizational objectives.
- It does this in a way that also satisfies the needs and aspirations of all the people involved.
- Inhibitors or blocks to learning are being identified and removed and strong enhancers and structural support for sustained continuous learning are being put in place.
- A climate of continuous learning and improvement is being created.

There are compelling reasons for progressing down this route – the following are two powerful quotes that underline the power and business critical nature of a learning culture:

- ‘The rate at which an organisation learns (acquires knowledge) may become the only sustainable source of competitive advantage’, Ray Stata (7).
- ‘For an organisation to survive its rate of learning must be equal to or greater than the rate of change in its external environment’, Reginald Revans (8).

I would add some personal observations regarding the role of knowledge in an organization:

- Knowledge is not hierarchical.
- Knowledge is not power (internal), but it does create external competitive capability.
- All knowledge is good.
- The ability to make decisions based on shared knowledge and understanding
 - radically speeds up decision making processes;
 - improves accuracy and saliency of outputs;
 - confers competitive advantage.
- Training speeds up knowledge acquisition and embeds it across an organization.
- Knowledge provides an ‘internal language’ and speeds up internal and external communication.
- Knowledge provides pace for internal decisions.
- Knowledge improves decision-making and outcomes.
- Qualifications provide a benchmark for the organization and for the customer.
- Learning is integral to the delivery of a successful World Class Manufacturing strategy.
- Learning is integral to the ability of an enterprise to compete.
- Learning is cultural and enlightened enterprises gain competitive advantage.
- The provision of tiered qualifications supports the right level of learning across an organization.
- Knowledge supplies on-time and in-full answers.
- Knowledge informs the future.

So how does an organization aspiring to take the journey to becoming a Learning Organization approach the journey? I refer the reader to ‘A toolkit for the learning organisation’, developed by Pearn Kandola (9). This comprehensive toolkit will take organizations through that journey – and remarkably one of the first lessons is drawing out how much knowledge organizations already possess, but subconsciously. The toolkit will accelerate the process of bringing that knowledge into full play as a conscious capability.

In the context of the brewing and distilling industries, resources available to support a learning organization are

supplied by a number of learning providers and membership organizations, which impart a variety of interventions to support education, learning and application.

The Institute of Brewing and Distilling has been providing resources in the form of publications since the first volume of the *Journal of the Institute of Brewing* in 1895 and the launch of professional qualifications in 1930.

A reminder of the IBD Mission Statement – ‘The advancement of education and professional development in the science and technology of brewing, distilling and related industries’ – reinforces the IBD’s commitment to support opportunities to learn. To support the Mission, the IBD has developed professional qualifications that support the delivery of learning into the workplace:

- The IBD has created a learning ladder to meet the needs of all those involved in the brewing and distilling industries – with a rung available from very introductory level science and technology through to Master status.
- These IBD qualifications enjoy global support and in 2011 more than 1800 examination papers, in over 40 countries, were written.
- The IBD has also introduced a comprehensive Continuous Professional Development (CPD) scheme that can be used by its members to record and validate their ongoing iterative workplace learning – the IBD CPD scheme can in turn be linked to the employer’s in house learning and development schemes.

In conclusion:

- Learning is integral to World Class Manufacturing strategies.
- Learning is integral to the ability of an enterprise to compete.
- Learning is cultural – and enlightened enterprises gain competitive advantage.
- The provision of tiered qualifications supports the appropriate level of learning across an organization.
- Knowledge supplies on-time and in-full answers.
- Knowledge supports pace in decision-making.
- Knowledge informs the future.

Technology is repeatable and not unique to your organization – but employees are. By investing in your unique resource everyone gains – the individual, the team, the organization, the organization’s customers and the customer’s customers. Well-trained and motivated employees, operating within a learning organization, will be your biggest asset in leveraging superior performance.

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