

Continuous Improvement, Learning Organisation, Quality: What do they mean?

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The concepts in this article have been drawn from the following sources:-

Burgoyne, J Pedler, M & Boydell, I *Towards the Learning Company* London, McGraw-Hill, 1994 (chapter 2)

Senge, P Roberts, C Ross, R Smith, B Kleiner, A *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook - Strategies and Tools for building a Learning Organisation* London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1994 (chapter 8)

The paper was originally drawn together as part of a program of 'continuous improvement' workshops I developed while employed by the SA Regional Office of the Australian Securities Commission.

Continuous Improvement, Learning Organisation, Quality. What do they mean?

The terms 'Learning Organisation', 'Continuous Improvement' and 'Quality' are much talked about but are pretty tough concepts to pin down in any one manner. And if the truth be known, these terms will mean different things to different organisations/professions, which is as it should be. What is important is for an organisation, or a profession, to create its own *dictionary* around these terms.

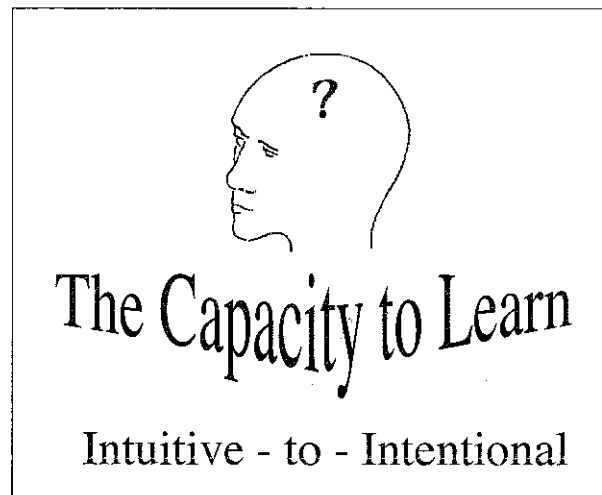
To assist people to create an environment whereby they can contribute positively to continuous improvement, it will be useful to put some context around the terms

- The term 'continuous improvement' has been summed up as a "philosophy that says we will always try to improve what we do". It has also been said "that the most important thing in all of this, is that we need to achieve an organisational culture whereby we all regard continuously improving as a part of our everyday approach to work"¹.
- A 'learning organisation' could be described as an organisation that has a culture which allows us to think and interact in a way that promotes a capacity to self-renew or continuously improve at the individual, team and organisational levels

- Research has shown that in Japan, 'quality' means perfection, in Germany, it means precision and in the United States it means fit for purpose. In Australia however, we use the word to communicate the "quality of relationship". When we talk about relationships in this sense, we are primarily referring to the relationships between the organisation or profession and its clients.

Although there is very little difference in the above points, it could be construed that

- 'continuous improvement' is a description of the processes which co-ordinate and integrate the use of specific strategies and tools in our day to day work, to help us *learn* how to do our jobs more efficiently and effectively and thereby provide a 'quality' service to our clients, and
- a 'Learning Organisation' is the product of a culture which will allow us to think and interact in a way which supports the use of the continuous improvement strategies and tools



The following statement by the American thinker and innovator Buckminster Fuller illustrates these concepts

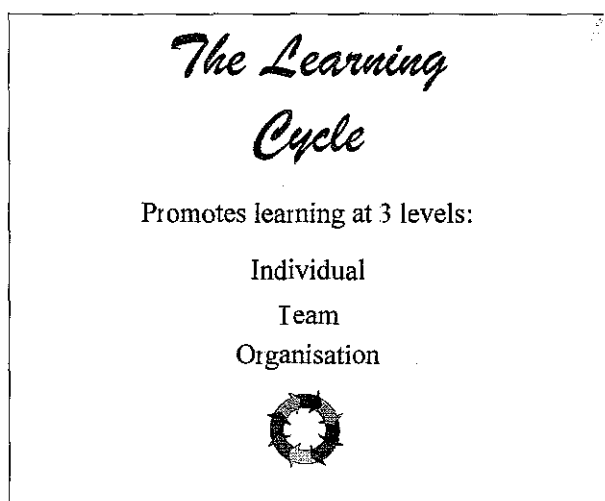
"if you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don't bother trying to teach them. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to a new way of thinking"²

This phrase, I think, sums up to a degree what the relationship is between the terms 'Learning Organisation' and 'Continuous Improvement' - i.e. the 'new way of thinking' refers to the culture of an organisation, say a Learning Organisation, and the 'tools' referred to are those which we need to use to help us continuously improve

These comments still do not put anything tangible around the terms 'Learning Organisation' or 'Continuous Improvement'. A common thread, however, can be discerned, and that is *the capacity to learn*. In order to develop the culture of a Learning Organisation, we must have the capacity to move from "learning which 'just happens' as a consequence of having an experience (i.e. - intuitive learning) to intentionally learning from our experiences" by utilising specific tools or by employing specific strategies etc. This capacity to learn extends to both the individual and the organisation. Peter Senge says in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*

"The organisation that will truly excel in the future will be the organisation that discovers how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in the organisation"⁴

The big idea in all of this is to do what we probably do not do, and that is *to release individual and team talents*. As has been said, "with every pair of hands you get a free brain"⁵ We know we have many brains out there, but do we nurture or encourage them to their greatest potential both individually and collectively?



If 'the capacity to learn' is central to the concepts of the learning organisation and continuous improvement, we must explore what is meant by the term 'learning'.

Old concepts of learning were simple:

“I would meet a problem I could not solve or something I did not know and through learning, I would acquire the knowledge or skill necessary for my needs or to solve the problem.”⁶

Learning was seen as knowledge banking/storing information

There is now, however, an acknowledgment by contemporary theorists that learning is much more than the acquisition of facts. Rather, it is a dynamic process which needs to be constantly moving around a cycle

Contemporary views also tell us that learning within organisations must occur at different levels if the organisation is to be successful. These levels of learning can be equated to the *individual*, the *team* and the whole *organisation* and must each be built into a *learning cycle* if ‘real’ learning is to occur.

What is the learning that occurs at each of these levels?...

At the....

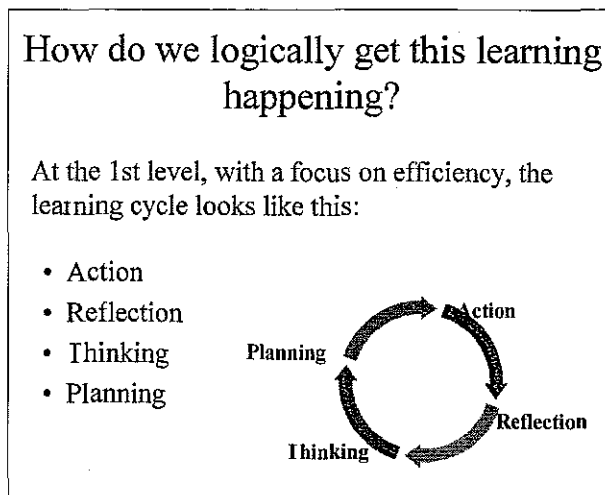
- **Individual Level**, the focus is on efficiency.
ie: looking at tasks/activities specifically for ways of improving the performance of the task
- **Team Level**, the focus is on effectiveness
ie: looking at whether the right task(s) are being undertaken in order to achieve our objectives.
- **Organisational Level**, the focus is on service.
ie: looking at whether our organisational objectives are in line with client needs/expectations

At the individual level, or level 1 learning, the focus is on efficiency. This is the area where specific tasks or activities that are undertaken are examined for better ways of performing them. It could also be called operational learning. It starts off with an operational task/activity which may or may not be working as we expect. How we perform this task/activity is then examined and learnt from, changes are made and we carry out the task/activity again in line with the changes made. At this level, we are focussing on *how* to carry out the task/activity more efficiently, or in other words, how to do things more quickly and how to ensure a closer alignment of what is carried out with what was planned

... At the team level, or level 2 learning, the focus is on effectiveness. Here we are asking questions such as “are we putting effort into the right things in order to meet our goals and objectives”? Whereas in the previous level we were concentrating on the *how* of doing our work, at this level, we have moved our focus to the *what*. This level involves reflecting on operational performance and relating that performance to the achievement of our goals etc.

.. At the organisational level, or level 3 learning, the focus is on service. Here we are asking questions such as “Why are we doing this work?” “To what end or for what purpose are we doing this work?” “Are our organisational goals and objectives right?” “Are we meeting our clients needs?” Whereas in the previous levels we were concentrating on the *how* and *what*, at this level, we have moved our focus to the *why*.

And so, how do we logically get this learning happening and what is the learning cycle?..

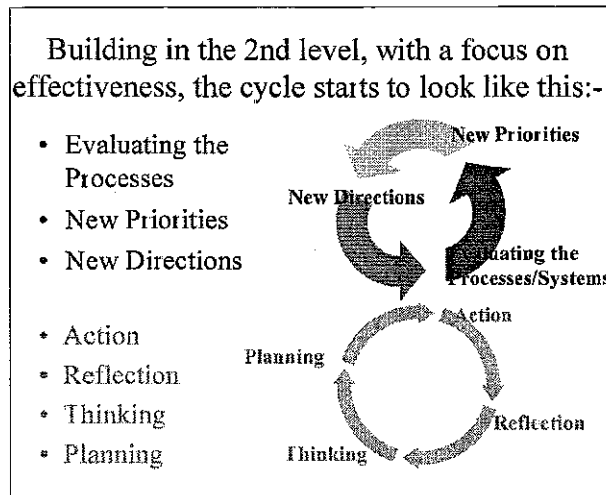


At the 1st level, you will recall that the focus is on *how* to carry out the task/activity more efficiently. In order to do this, we can apply a 1st loop to the learning cycle as depicted above. The following describes each stage of this part of the cycle:-

- Action:** This is the act of performing the task/activity.
- Reflection:** “At this stage, we become an observer of our own thinking and acting This phase might start with a post-mortem about the previous performance of the task/activity: How well did it go? What were we thinking and feeling during the process? What underlying “theories in use” seemed to affect the way we handled it?”⁷
- Thinking:** This is the stage of coming up with ideas and possibilities for doing the task/activity differently At this stage, we also need to take into consideration what links the task/activity has with other tasks/activities happening around us
- Planning:** Here, we agree on a method for carrying out the action again. From the ideas and possibilities generated in the **thinking** stage, we choose and refine our approach “Planning incorporates an element of choice: here is the alternative we choose to take, and here are the reasons why.”⁷

We then cycle around to performing the **Action** again but in its new way.

Each point at this 'individual' level can be undertaken in a team environment with each of the stages becoming visible to everyone involved. This then assists the next level of the learning cycle.



At the 2nd level of the learning cycle, in a team environment, you will recall that the focus is on *what* tasks/activities we are undertaking in order to be effective, or in order to meet our goals and objectives. To do this, we can apply a 2nd loop to the learning cycle as shown above.

The following describes each stage of this part of the cycle:-

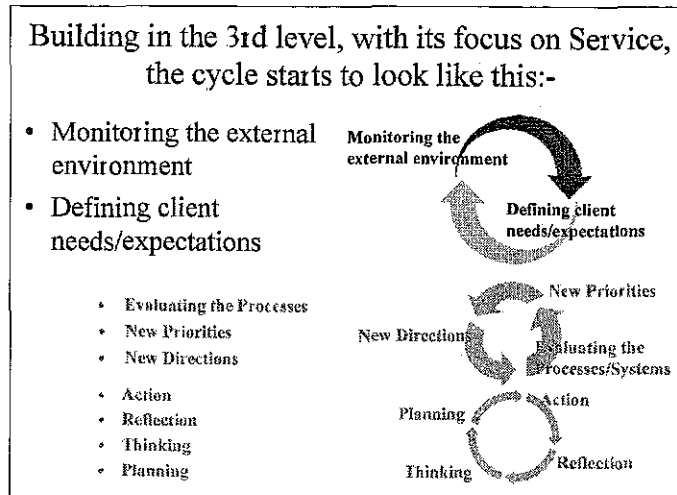
Evaluating the Processes: At this stage we are measuring our results against performance indicators and reflecting on how we were supported in the achievement of those results. In relation to support, we are looking at the various systems in place, both human and physical. For example:

- were there sufficient HR plans, policies and practices in place?
- were there any blockages in the communication processes?
- was the flow of information inhibited or made easier by the various systems in place?
- was there any obstruction or 'noise' which impacted on our ability to perform the task/activity?

New Priorities: Here we are critically assessing whether or not the tasks/activities we are undertaking are actually achieving our goals and objectives and coming up with new ways or priorities in order to meet those goals and objectives. We are also looking at generating ideas and setting new priorities in relation to the support we receive.

New Directions: Here we are setting new directions which will guide how and what we do. From the information gathered in the previous stages, we can establish refined plans and systems to give direction and support to the performance of our tasks/ activities.

Where does the cycle go next?

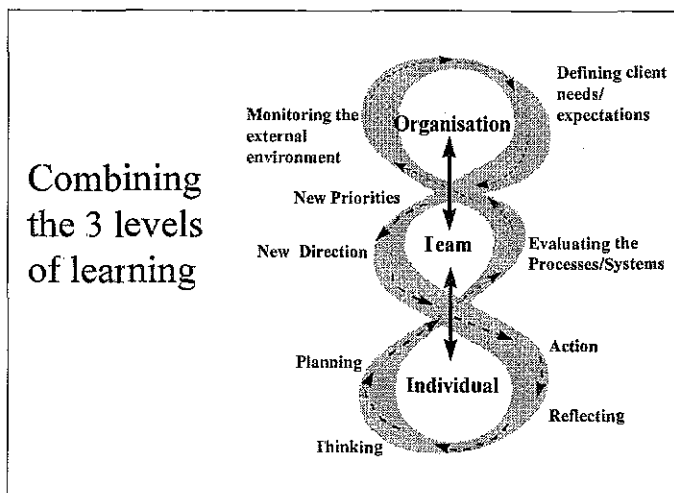


At the 3rd level, you will recall that the focus is on *why* we have set the organisational goals/objectives we have and do they meet our client needs? In order to do this, we can add a 3rd loop to the learning cycle as shown above. The following describes the two stages of this part of the cycle

Monitoring the external environment: This is a process which prompts us to examine the impact we are having on the external environment. We also need to examine questions such as who are our clients/stakeholders and what is their reactions to the various programs of activities we undertake etc. It is a process which requires a mindset that we are part of the market within which we operate and not separate from it.

Defining client needs/expectations: Here we are looking at strategies where we can reflect on the impact we are having and communicate about this to the various client/stakeholder groups. We need to undertake a process through which we can discern what it is that the clients are wanting. Hence the 'service' orientation of this level of learning.

How do we combine each of these levels of learning?



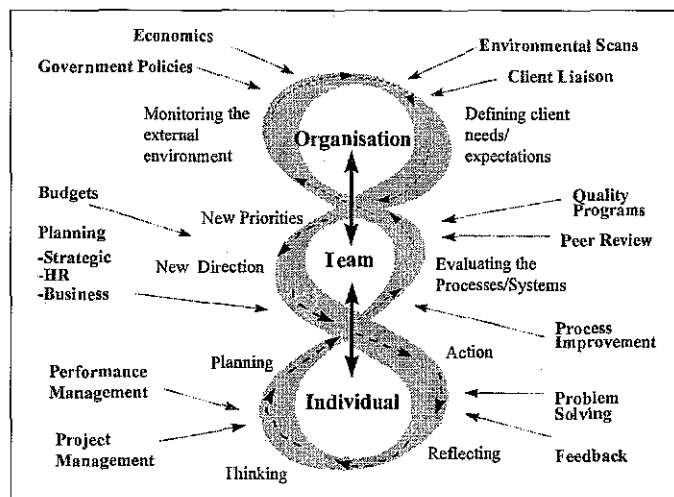
The above diagram illustrates how the three levels of learning combine to create the cyclic pattern required to continuously improve individual, team and organisational performance

Following the path around the cycle will look something like this

- You undertake an *action* or perform a task/activity
- you then *reflect* on that task by carrying out a post-mortem
- from there, you *think* or generate ideas on how you might do the task/activity better; and then you come up with a *plan* to carry out the task differently
- we then move to *evaluating the current processes/systems* to check if the new way of performing the task is still going to meet the objectives and if there is the right support for the new way of performing the task/activity
- from here, we need to have a reality check by *monitoring the external environment and defining client needs/expectations* to see if the objectives we are basing our actions on are the right objectives
- once our objectives have been established based on the principles of service, we can then set *new priorities* and *new directions* to help us determine the *actions* we take ...and so on around the cycle.

Each step within the cycle need not be carried out by the one person. In fact, this would be unrealistic to expect. Steps can be carried out independently by various members of the organisation, however, critical to this is the communication which occurs between the three levels. The double headed arrows at the centre of the cycle represent the dynamic relationship necessary to create a true *learning* environment within an organisation.

What are the tools and strategies that can be employed as enablers of this cycle?...



I stated earlier in this article that we can increase our *capacity to learn* through utilising specific tools and strategies. The above diagram illustrates some of the tools and strategies that you can employ in the endeavour to learn

These examples are by no means exhaustive but serve to demonstrate the wide scope of tools and strategies which can be used at each level of learning. It is also worth pointing out that the location of the tools/strategies in this diagram is flexible.

What are some other tools/strategies that could be utilised to increase our capacity and support our efforts to learn? Some further examples could be:-

- Professional liaison meetings
- Personal Development Plans
- Competency Based Training
- HR Policies
- Team Building
- Vision/Values/Mission statement etc

Summary

In summary, the diagram depicts that Continuous Improvement is not an 'add on' program but an integrated framework for change

The key to the learning cycle working is the dynamic relationship between the levels of learning and the use of tools to support our learning. Success will depend upon the extent of communication between the levels of learning and a consistent use of the various tools.

The value added to an organisation through using a model such as this is that it will help define and communicate what real genuine benefit is given/added to the client.

References

- 1 Stretton, S., "Continuous improvement hits Adelaide", *A SCANDAL*, (ASC, Adelaide), 5(13), 30 June 1995
- 2 Senge, P et al *The fifth discipline fieldbook - strategies and tools for building a learning organisation*, London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1994 p 28
- 3 Honey, P. *The learning experience* (Videorecording), London, BBC, 1992
- 4 Senge, op cit
- 5 Rylatt, A. *Learning unlimited*, NSW, Business and Professional Publishing, 1994
- 6 Burgoyne, J, Pedler, M & Boydell, I *Towards the learning company*, London, McGraw-Hill, 1994
- 7 Senge, op cit , pp 60-61