



Stage 2 - LEADERSHIP FOR STRATEGY

## Module 13 – LEARNING ORGANISATION

The Leadership Academy is a learning and action programme for mayors, senior officials and elected representatives of local government.

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# 1 MODULE OVERVIEW

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## 1.1 BACKGROUND

- The role of good leadership is to strive for improvement. Individuals and Organisations that wish to improve should reflect on actual performance, evaluate progress and identify challenges. Open reflection on past and actual processes, on their strengths and weaknesses and on the performance they produce is a key source of learning and an important driver for change. Only organisations that can face their present can improve their future performance. A learning organisation creates the structure and processes that accommodates on-going reflection and improvement.

## 1.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To present the concept of a 'learning organisation' and give ideas on how participants can encourage learning in their own organisations.

## 1.3 LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Participants understand the role of learning in improving performance in their organisation.
- Participants learn about the various sources and techniques of organisational learning.
- Participants become more aware of one's own personal tendencies towards encouraging learning and how they might contribute to the learning culture of the organisation.

As a result of this learning, participants will strengthen the learning culture within their organisation as a way of raising standards of performance.

## 1.4 DURATION

- 90 minutes

## 2 MODULE STRUCTURE

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### 2.1 INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION

- Participants identify typical obstacles to organisation learning.

### 2.2 INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE - SELF-ASSESSMENT - HOW WELL DO YOU PERSONALLY ENCOURAGE A LEARNING APPROACH?

- Participants work on their own to assess how well they encourage a 'learning' approach in their organisation by completing the self-assessment questionnaire;
- Plenary discussion.

### 2.3 GROUP EXERCISE – STRENGTHENING AN ORGANISATION'S LEARNING APPROACH

- In groups, participants complete the Section 5.2 Table;
- Groups discuss how the different elements in the learning approach might be strengthened in a typical organisation. What difference would this make? Which of the learning elements need strengthening the most in their organisation? What are the obstacles? How might a learning approach be institutionalised?

## 3 WORKING DEFINITIONS

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### 3.1 LEARNING ORGANISATION

The concept of the learning organisation was created by Peter Senge<sup>1</sup> The learning organisation term refers to an organisation that establishes systematic reflection on its own processes and facilitates institutional learning and the learning of its members, and through the reflection and learning continuously transforms itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, Peter M. (1990, revised 2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organisation* New York: Doubleday



## 4 KEY CONCEPTS

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Learning can deliver change. The starting point for organisational leadership is to understand the challenges faced by the organisation. This is the starting point for raising its standards of performance and for initiating change.

Overcoming challenges always requires change; but change is tough. There are always obstacles. How can they be overcome? Learning is essential.

### 4.1.1 Seven Obstacles to Change<sup>2</sup>

1. *Management by measurement*  
(focuses on short term; ignores intangibles that may matter; some factors outside control)
2. *Compliance culture*  
(based on external motivation only; get ahead by pleasing boss; use of fear)
3. *Right or wrong answers*  
(emphasises technical issues; ignores 'grey' areas)
4. *Uniformity*  
(diversity seen as problem; conflicts suppressed in favour of superficial agreements)
5. *Predictability and controllability*  
(management seen as control; routine approach)
6. *Excessive competitiveness and distrust*  
(leads to poor team-work, diverging goals, personal agendas)
7. *Loss of sense of integrated organisation*  
(cannot see whole; fragmentation; ignores underlying forces for and against change; local good practice and innovation not spread)

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<sup>2</sup> Some of this material is inspired by Peter M. Senge (The Fifth Discipline)

The way to overcome these obstacles to change is through learning – not just individual learning but organisation learning. Organisational challenges are everyday questions in the workplace. How have other organisations dealt with them? What is 'best practice'? To what extent could existing staff develop their own expertise to meet the challenges? Do they readily learn from each other and within teams? Do managers encourage such learning?

For effective operation, an open communication is necessary: a climate where problematic issues can be raised and a 'learning culture' is necessary, where reflection and learning is an every-day habit. This will enable:

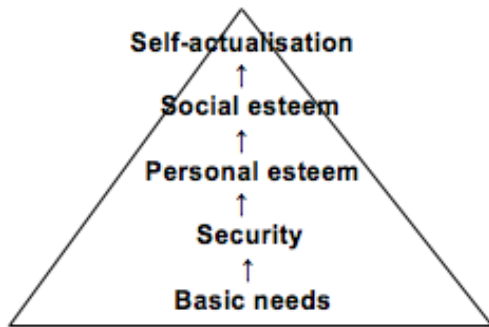
- a) Critical reflection on the operation and the accomplishments;
- b) Experience to be shared;
- c) Innovation to be encouraged;
- d) New approaches to be tested and lessons learned;
- e) Best practices elsewhere to be identified and integrated within the organisation.

One level of learning is the personal. Staff should be respected for their expertise and enabled to make full use of their potential; personal training and development should be seen to be important; open communications is essential; coaching is an everyday training technique.

Maslow<sup>3</sup> proposed a hierarchy of needs:

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<sup>3</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. Psychological Review, 50, 370-396. Available at: <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>



The key drivers of self-actualisation are:

- Constantly challenging the status quo with courage, curiosity and will;
- Desire for personal best;
- Help others to achieve full potential.

These drivers demand learning. The best learning therefore comes when staff member is seeking to maximise his/her experience of working in the organisation. Greater learning can allow staff to take higher levels of responsibility. Managers can delegate more. Unfortunately, few organisations support learning.

It is important to see that Just as we are who we are mainly because of our learning over a lifetime, so it is with organisations. For effective organisational operation learning needs to take place not only on personal level but organisational processes need to be established that exploit the knowledge, insights and experience of staff for learning on the organisational level. There are several factors that get in the way of organisational learning as well.

#### 4.1.2 Seven Obstacles to Organisational Learning

1. *'I am my position'*

*(enjoys authority of position rather than from leadership)*

2. *Always someone / something else to blame*

*(hasn't got courage to accept responsibility; defensive routines; fails to listen actively)*

3. *Re-activeness*

*(happy to follow events; lacks vision and purpose for better future)*

4. *Focus on events*

*(afraid of conflict; short-termism; focus on symptoms; stress for excessive change)*

5. *Doesn't see trends and processes*

*(superficial; afraid to examine issues in depth to find real causes; relies on platitudes; sticks with routine and faces boredom)*

6. *Doesn't learn from decisions*

*(afraid to accept responsibility for mistakes)*

7. *Personal agendas of management teams*

*(doesn't see longer term consequences; organisation capacity and public interest take second place)*

Leaders should reflect on whether their staff and organisations are passive or active in our approach to learning? If they are active, what is it that makes them active? What mechanisms might senior managers introduce to ensure and improve every-day learning across the organisation?

Greater learning can allow staff to take higher levels of responsibility. Managers can delegate more. But organisational learning creates a shared sense of direction and flexibility and potential to change at the same time. By the same token, the social process of organisational learning ensures that staff remained aligned within the organisation as they exercise greater authority.

A 'learning culture' is a foundation for delivering high standards of performance. Creating a learning culture is a key challenge of senior managers, especially when conditions are changing and the future is uncertain.

#### 4.1.3 Elements of A Learning Approach

Peter Senge (1990) introduced the concept of the learning organisation for organisations that learn to thrive on change and constantly innovate. They



create a culture and systematic processes for cultivating innovation that helps them adjust to changing conditions and constantly improve their operation. Senge summarized his concept in five key disciplines that organisations need to master in order to become learning organisations. These disciplines<sup>4</sup> are:

1. Personal Mastery;
2. Shared Vision;
3. Mental Models;
4. Team Learning;
5. Systems Thinking

Each of these disciplines are necessary for a learning organisations.

**Personal Mastery** is centrally to do with 'self-awareness' – how much we know about ourselves and the impact our behaviour has on others. Personal mastery is the human face of change – to manage change relationships sensitively, to be willing to have our own beliefs and values challenged and to ensure our change interactions and behaviours are authentic, congruent and principled. Leaders learn to use tools like 'Perceptual Positions' and 'Reframing' to enhance the quality of interaction and relationship in and outside their teams.

**Shared Vision:** The key vision question is 'What do we want to create together?' Taking time early in the change process to have the conversations needed to shape a truly shared vision is crucial to build common understandings and commitments, free people's aspirations and hopes and identify reservations and resistances. Leaders learn to use tools such as 'Positive Visioning', 'Concept-shifting' and 'Values Alignment' to create a shared vision, forge common meaning/focus and mutually agree what the learning targets, improvement strategies and challenge-goals should be to get there.

**Mental Models:** One key to change success is in surfacing deep-seated mental models - beliefs, values, mind-sets and assumptions that determine the way people think and act. Getting in touch with the thinking going on about change in your

workplace, challenging or clarifying assumptions and encouraging people to reframe is essential. Leaders learn to use tools like the 'Ladder of Inference' and 'Reflective Inquiry' to practise making their mental models clearer for each other and challenging each other's' assumptions in order to build shared understanding.

**Team Learning** happens when teams start 'thinking together' – sharing their experience, insights, knowledge and skills with each other about how to do things better. Teams develop reflection, inquiry and discussion skills to conduct more skillful change conversations with each other which form the basis for creating a shared vision of change and deciding on common commitments to action. It's also about teams developing the discipline to use the action learning cycle rigorously in change-work. Leaders learn to use tools like the 'Action-Learning Cycle' and 'Dialogue' to develop critical reflection skills and conduct more robust, skillful discussions with their teams and each other.

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Copper 2016



## 5 EXERCISES

### 5.1 EXERCISE 1 – INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE – SELF-ASSESSMENT - HOW WELL DO YOU PERSONALLY ENCOURAGE A LEARNING APPROACH?

(1: not very well. 4: very well)

QUESTIONS		1	2	3	4
1	I encourage others to undertake new projects to widen their experience.				
2	I always explain the big picture behind current projects.				
3	I ask for feedback from stakeholders on the strategies we are following.				
4	We try to involve many people in arriving at decisions.				
5	I encourage all team members to question our way of working.				
6	People are encouraged to work in small groups for learning purposes.				
7	We treat problems as opportunities for learning.				
8	I share my personal development plans with my team.				
9	All our people have their own personal development plans.				
10	We take time out to think about the big picture together.				
11	I always want to hear how strategies are working in practice.				
12	I try to involve all persons involved in a problem at finding the solution.				
13	I encourage thoughtful experiment in the way we do things.				
14	We always share the results of experiments, whether or not they work.				
15	When someone makes a mistake, it starts a good discussion rather than blame.				
16	In team meetings, I make it plain what I am learning from the discussion.				
17	When I meet with colleagues, I ask about what they have been learning recently.				
18	I have a strong sense of strategic direction and communicate this.				
19	Our team is keen to let senior management know how the programmes are going.				
20	Up to the deadline, everyone can have their say.				
21	People constantly think about how they are working.				
22	We make time for the transfer of knowledge across teams.				
23	When a problem arises, we compete to get to work on it.				
24	I maintain the space for my own learning in spite of pressures.				
TOTAL					

#### Scoring:

Add the scores from the 24 questions in 8 columns; the final 8 totals correspond to the 8 elements in the learning approach to strategy

(1 – Space; 2 – Big Picture; 3 – Feedback; 4 – Participation; 5 – Framework; 6 – Experiment; 7 – Learning; 8 – Personal Example):

Questions: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

Score: (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (elements)

There are no right or wrong answers. But the scores will indicate to you where you might want to develop and where you are a good example.

1. What are your strengths in this area?
2. How do your responses compare with those of your colleagues?
3. What one thing could you do to develop yourself further?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation as a learning organisation?
5. How could you change your organisation into a learning organisation?

## 5.2 EXERCISE 2 – GROUP EXERCISE – STRENGTHENING AN ORGANISATION’S LEARNING APPROACH

NO.	LEARNING ELEMENTS	CURRENT SITUATION	HOW TO STRENGTHEN THEM?
1	Space		
2	Big picture		
3	Feedback		
4	Participation		
5	Framework		
6	Experiment		

7	Reflection		
8	Personal example		

*What are the key learning elements that a typical organisation should be pursuing now in order to maximize its chances of tackling the strategic challenges facing them?*

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