

Learning Organisation Dilemmas: an exploratory study of consultants' mental models.

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Abstract

While the term ‘learning organisation’ is widely used, using measures to describe organisational learning efforts remains a challenge to researchers and business practitioners. Developing a useful measure requires knowledge creation work to draw together currently fragmented mental models of what constitutes a learning organisation. This paper reports on a study in which measurement criteria were elicited from New Zealand experts. Eight experts took part in a Delphi process which generated a set of ten criteria, along with qualms they had regarding the use of these criteria in measurement efforts. The study highlighted dilemmas that face researchers attempting to develop measurement systems useful for describing learning organisations: the degree to which criteria should be emotionally neutral or emotionally engaged; the extent to which descriptions can be generalised to allow comparisons between organisations and the need to describe particular, or unique, aspects of an organisation; and the extent to which measurement can deal with issues fundamental to learning rather than surface-level indicators. Organisations also face dilemmas relating to measurement. Seeking to perform against one criterion, such as Self Reliance, may inhibit the organisation’s ability to pursue another, such as Knowledge Sharing.

The term 'Learning Organisation' appears frequently in managerial literature, yet there is a high degree of confusion over its meaning. Some researchers contend that the term is meaningless, given that all organisations learn (Nevis & DiBella, 1998). To others, the term is a metaphor that provides a means for describing people's vision of an ideal organisation: one in which, as Kofman & Senge (1993) state, "we would all like to work."

The abstract nature of the term 'learning organisation' makes it possible for people to hold very different understandings of its meaning. People may use the same term to represent significantly different metaphors (Ramsey, 2003). Use of a common term may disguise important differences that shape the way organisations go about learning efforts. These differences create challenges for anyone wanting to measure or describe learning organisations.

Lahteenmaki, Toivonen & Mattila (2001) concluded that literature on learning organisations was fragmented, and that this fragmentation was an obstacle to empirical research. Confusion as to the nature of learning organisations is thus likely to impact negatively on both practitioners seeking to create learning organisations, and on researchers seeking to understand, describe and compare efforts to become learning organisations. Establishing measures would allow comparisons to be made between organisations and to evaluate the impact of interventions.

One way to establish how learning organisations might be measured is to explore the existing knowledge held by those with experience working in the field. Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) have discussed how such 'knowledge-creating' work can be done. They suggest that individuals working within a field typically have the knowledge needed for innovation, but their knowledge exists in a tacit form. Ways must be found to explore intuitions and hunches in order to transform personal, tacit knowledge into organisational knowledge.

Undertaking such work requires an investigator to embrace ambiguity and redundancy. Experts within a field may be working in the same area and have conflicting mental models regarding the field of inquiry. According to Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), from the chaos of such conflicts, new knowledge can emerge. As tacit knowledge is made explicit, attention needs to be paid to the contradictions and conflicts that emerge so that robust, holistic models can be established.

This article reports on a study that aimed to make explicit underlying mental models of New Zealand experts on the learning organisation. The purpose of the study was to identify criteria that could be used to identify and describe learning organisations. In doing so, the

expert group would also be able to expose some of the challenges inherent in any effort to measure learning organisations.

Method

A decision-making process known as the Delphi Technique was adopted for the study. The Delphi Technique was developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s as a systematic method for collecting and organising the opinions of a group of experts (Baron & Greenberg, 1990). The Delphi Technique has since been successfully applied in a wide range of organisational settings and to a variety of problems (Luthans, 1977).

The key feature of the Delphi Technique is the anonymity of the experts taking part. Experts are enlisted in the process and presented with a problem. They provide the researcher with their individual responses. The researcher then compiles the responses and feeds the compiled responses back to the individual members of the expert group. The experts are then able to modify their original positions on the basis of the thinking of the group as a whole. The researcher continues to elicit individual responses from the group, compile answers and feed compiled responses back to the group until the problem has been resolved with an answer that represents the consensus of the group.

When used by the Rand Corporation the Delphi Technique was conducted via mail. For this study email was used. The Delphi Technique progressed through the following seven stages:

1. A message was sent to participants inviting them to take part in the study. If they chose to participate, they were asked to nominate organisations that they thought were outstanding examples of New Zealand learning organisations, and to explain the reasoning behind their nominations.
2. Messages were reviewed in order to identify common themes. Each of these was summarised in a short statement. These statements were compiled into a list of criteria summarising the participants' reasons for nominations.
3. The list of criteria was fed back to the participants, who were asked to indicate what other criteria ought to be added to the list.
4. Responses were reviewed and new themes identified. Again, themes were summarised into short statements. These were added to the original criteria to produce an expanded list.
5. The expanded list of criteria was fed back to participants who were asked to describe any qualms they held regarding the criteria.

6. Participants' messages regarding qualms were reviewed and common themes were identified. Again, statements summarising themes were constructed and compiled into a list of qualms.

This process was designed to achieve two purposes: firstly, to generate criteria representing the mental models of experts, and secondly, to surface dilemmas that organisations are likely to face when pursuing the goal of becoming a learning organisation.

Asking people to make their criteria explicit is a means of gaining insight into their mental models. According to Ross (1994) and Kofman (1994) mental models—our deep beliefs about the world—determine what we give our attention to. Asking people about criteria enables us to explore where their attention is being directed, and therefore where learning is most likely to happen. The Delphi process is designed to expose the mental models of experts to one another in order to develop common understanding (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Dilemmas provide a means of understanding and reconciling differences (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). Given the large number of differences between groups making up the field of Organisational Learning, identifying dilemmas has the potential to provide useful insights for both academics and practitioners seeking a holistic view of what learning efforts involve.

In using dilemmas it was not important for the expert group to reach a consensus on criteria to be used in describing learning organisations. A criterion item may have been suggested by just one member of the group yet be of value to the study by surfacing a dilemma, perhaps through 'qualms' the item generates in others.

Hampden-Turner (1990) has discussed how dilemmas naturally lead people to experience qualms. Uncertainty over the way in which dilemmas are being handled and the possible neglect of critical values is a cause for anxiety. The unconscious nature of values, however, may mean that people are reluctant to give voice to any vague feelings of unease they might have. By inviting experts to express their qualms regarding the listed criteria they were able to provide a critique of what had been generated by earlier rounds with the reassurance that 'it's OK to be anxious' about aspects of the listed criteria that may seem trivial. Criteria suggested by experts also enable dilemmas to be surfaced. One criterion (A) may be in opposition to another, (B), so that the better one performs on Criterion A the worse one performs on Criterion B.

In this study a criterion or a qualm could be included in further stages of the process on the basis of comments by one expert. The Delphi process initially accepts all suggestions

participants make, then seeks endorsement from the group as a whole. For this reason, no distinction is made between a criterion suggested by one expert and a criterion suggested by several.

The Sample

Sixteen people were identified as potential participants in the study. Inclusion in the group was on the basis of their involvement in capacity building work in New Zealand, in one or more of Senge's five disciplines. Twelve individuals had published work or presented at conferences in areas relating to these disciplines. The remaining four people were known to the researcher for their work on learning organisations. All were sent a message requesting their participation in the Delphi process.

Eight of the sixteen originally contacted agreed to take part in the Delphi process. A ninth person declined but nominated a colleague who agreed to take part. One person initially accepted, took part in the early stages of the process, but subsequently withdrew.

The final Expert Group (as they were referred to) consisted of four males and four females. Four were principals in consulting companies, one acted in a learning function within a private organisation, one had an executive role in an organisation whose business was primarily concerned with individual and organisational learning, and two worked within academic institutions.

While the study involved a small sample—an expert group of eight—this is appropriate for explorative research based on Dilemma Theory (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). Because dilemmas are experienced by people throughout a community a small sample can be used in the surfacing process. Larger sample sizes and issues of representation become important in later research where dilemmas are used to describe values within a community.

Results

The Expert group generated a set of ten criteria for assessing the extent to which an organisation was an example of a Learning Organisation, and a set of five qualms regarding the criteria.

The first message to the asked them to nominate exemplary New Zealand learning organisations and to give the reasons behind their nominations. Experts' responses produced six criteria. This set of six criteria were fed back to the Expert group in a second message which invited them to suggest what other criteria might be added to make the list complete. The criteria are shown below in the order in which they were generated.

Fundamental Change: When nominating exemplary companies, four experts discussed the importance of learning that was directed at fundamental change. That is, they indicated that it was important that learning be directed toward changing the very core of an organisation's design. Comments were:

The whole business project is itself about designing the business as an emergent learning system, intended to jump through several scale iterations.

[Learning efforts in the organisation focus on] their core design and development value creation processes.

[The organisation is] highly innovative in the types of products it produces.

[The organisation has shown] a readiness to address external challenges that required change to the business focus.

[The organisation] is getting out of the 'grievance' mode.

Every effort is made to put into practice current thinking in terms of manufacturing management and systems.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Engaged in learning processes that focus on change to the organisation's fundamental business concept.**

Senior Management Commitment: Two experts mentioned that individuals in executive positions were committed to, or champions of organisational learning. One nominated organisation had an "Org Learning person". Other comments were:

[There should be] someone dedicated to operationalising organisational learning.

[A named individual is] the inspiring light there.

[In a non-nominated organisation the consultants] backed out fast when there was no [senior management] commitment to change anything.

They have talented people actively promoting and encouraging a learning orientation.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Senior management commitment to learning efforts, including an executive level champion.**

Empowerment: Four experts indicated that it was important for organisations to have cultures in which people were empowered to make change. This might involve them taking action outside of traditionally defined roles. Experts made comments related to team-based activity, which blurs boundaries between particular jobs, and people throughout the organisation being able to make changes more commonly associated with managerial roles. Comments were:

[The organisation has] team based learning systems...[and]...a culture which values people and their on-going development.

[The organisation] operates a team based approach to manufacturing...teams are self managing...

[There is] wide-ranging trust, empowerment and synergy throughout the organisation [with] certainly no “us and them” attitudes.

[They have] come from a fear based culture to an ‘empowered’ one.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **An empowered culture that blurs traditional organisation roles and boundaries.**

Staff Engagement: Experts indicated they felt it was important that staff throughout an organisation were engaged in the conversation and experimentation associated with learning.

Comments were:

[There is] a focus by everyone on design and quality.

[There has been] an internal transformation, with staff moving from largely clerical to a professional...workforce.

They have undertaken a team based process incorporating reflection, that has transformed the way service is delivered throughout the organisation.

Information [on the organisation’s] operations [is] openly discussed.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Engagement of staff throughout the organisation in conversation and experimentation with products and services.**

An Intentional, Sustained Process: Six experts made comments that indicated it was important for organisations to be involved in learning processes for the long-term. It was evident that experts had experienced working with organisations where commitment to learning waned after a short burst of effort, and effective learning involved effort over “relatively long periods of time.” Comments were:

[They have been working on] team based learning systems for quite a few years.

[The organisation] intentionally set off on a process of learning, they call the “Learning Journey”.

[They aim] to ultimately function...

[A non-nominated organisation is an example of] ‘what not to do’ and lots of lessons on stop start learning.

[The organisation has had] structured initiatives over a period of years.

They're not even off the starting blocks.

They're just at the beginning of their journey.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Intentional process of organisational learning sustained over the long haul.**

Resource Availability: Two experts directly mentioned the effort nominated organisations had made to make learning resources and opportunities available to a wide range of staff. Comments included:

Throughout [the organisation] there is an appreciation of LO concepts and challenges, based on structured initiatives...

[The company] has an extensive library of books and journals that are available to all staff to use.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Developmental resources and opportunities available to a wide range of staff.**

Knowledge Management: In the second round of the Delphi process two experts commented that there should be explicit mention of processes of knowledge creation and knowledge management. Comments included:

[Learning organisations engage in] processes that enable tacit learning...to become explicit and be accessed by others involved in related contexts.

The whole idea is to intentionally generate knowledge within the organisation.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Efforts made to generate new knowledge, make it explicit and share it throughout the organisation.**

Recognition for Learning: In the second round one expert mentioned the need for:

formal and/or informal recognition for those people contributing to learning processes.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Recognition, both formal and informal, is given to those contributing to learning processes.**

Systems View of Learning: In the second round one expert commented on the need for organisations to consider the consequences of learning, both strategically and systemically. Consequences could be both “spatial”—impacting on functions other than the one initiating the learning—or “time-dependent”—changing factors such as attitude to risk and business outlook in ways that become critical over time. The expert commented:

There is little point in an organisation working intensively on learning and development in one area without thinking about the impact that such initiatives have on other areas in the organisation and how these change over time.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **Effort is made to consider in advance the likely consequences of learning initiatives on the organisation as a whole, e.g. on other parts of the organisation, culture, attitude to innovation.**

Self Reliance: In the second round one expert discussed the need for learning organisations to become self reliant in building their own capacity to facilitate learning. The expert commented:

Learning should be systematic and...this includes the organisational competencies to keep on facilitating learning from WITHIN the organisation. Many 'LO' organisations seem to actually mean that individuals have lots of training and they often rely on outsiders to 'train' or educate members.

These comments were summarised with the statement: **The organisation seeks to build its own capacity to facilitate future learning.**

Table 1 shows the complete list of criteria produced by the Expert group. The criteria are shown in the form in which they were fed back to the group in later stages of the Delphi process.

Table 1 Learning Organisation Criteria

Criterion 1: Engaged in learning processes that focus on change to the organisation's fundamental business concept.
Criterion 2: Senior management commitment to learning efforts, including an executive level champion.
Criterion 3: An empowered culture that blurs traditional organisation roles and boundaries.
Criterion 4: Engagement of staff throughout the organisation in conversation and experimentation with products and services.
Criterion 5: Intentional process of organisational learning sustained over the long haul.
Criterion 6: Developmental resources and opportunities available to a wide range of staff.

- Criterion 7: Efforts made to generate new knowledge, make it explicit and share it throughout the organisation.
- Criterion 8: Recognition, both formal and informal, is given to those contributing to learning processes.
- Criterion 9: Effort is made to consider in advance the likely consequences of learning initiatives on the organisation as a whole, e.g. on other parts of the organisation, culture, attitude to innovation.
- Criterion 10: The organisation seeks to build its own capacity to facilitate future learning.

Qualms: The third round of the Delphi process invited experts to engage in ‘qualming’: outlining whatever qualms they might feel regarding the criteria produced in earlier rounds.

Qualm 1 related to problems of wording that were created by the format of the criteria. Having relatively short, generalised descriptions designed to cover a range of comments by the expert group resulted in concern that the particular intent of some statements may have been missed. This reflected the dilemma I faced when distilling criteria from a variety of sources: whether to:

- (a) *generalise* and fall into the trap of having criteria that do not represent the full range of meaning intended, or
- (b) *particularise* by listing each possible meaning separately, and fall into the trap of producing an unworkably long set of criteria.

Roth and Kleiner (1998) take the particularising route to describing learning in organisations. Their descriptive work involves the creation of a learning history, which captures the nuances of an organisation’s experience using the words of those who shared the learning experience. While this work means that a learning organisation is described in terms that make sense to the people involved—and the learning history can act as a reflective tool to generate further learning—the ability to compare the organisation with others on common criteria is sacrificed.

Qualm 2 was that some criteria may be misleading because of their instrumental nature. For instance, recognition given for learning efforts (Criterion 8, Table 1) is a means of encouraging learning and an indication that the organisation values learning. Recognition and reward are not, however, the same as learning. Managers seeking to use this means of encouraging learning may unintentionally distract from the organisation’s vision. This qualm

highlights that individual criterion may be complementary and opposite to others, so that effort to meet one criterion may hamper efforts to meet another. This is, of course, an expression of the fundamental nature of dilemmas.

Qualm 3 expressed the concern that each criterion described only an end point, so that it was difficult for someone reading the criteria to apply them to an organisation where that end point was not fully being achieved. People wanted a more complete picture of the process an organisation might go through to reach that end point, particularly in view of the long-term nature of organisational efforts to become learning organisations.

Qualm 4 was a particular concern of one expert, who pointed out that the language used to express the criteria was emotionally neutral, while the motivation behind effort to become learning organisations was much more emotionally engaged. The emotional neutrality of statements is a consequence of generalisation. The risk of generalised, neutral statements is that people using the criteria may experience a disconnection between the statements and their experience of life in a learning organisation. The criteria may thus have little appeal to the communities they are designed to serve.

Qualm 5 expressed a concern that was not directly stated in the responses to Round 3 but had been mentioned in earlier comments. Many consider that becoming a learning organisation is an on-going process. A list of criteria may give executives the misleading impression that, criteria having been met, the status of ‘learning organisation’ had been achieved and that learning efforts were no longer a priority. Publishing a set of criteria could have the unintended consequence of generating short-term efforts to ‘measure up’ rather than any serious commitment to learning.

The qualms of the Expert group are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Qualms Expressed by the Expert Group

Qualm 1:	Wording of Criteria
Qualm 2:	Criterion gives misleading impression of the nature of learning
Qualm 3:	Criteria too short to give a full picture of what is meant, or the stages that an organisation would go through in the journey to being a learning organisation
Qualm 4:	Criteria are discussed in an emotionally neutral manner, giving a misleading impression about the nature of learning organisations.
Qualm 5:	Using criteria may give people the misleading impression that it is

possible to attain the status of being a ‘learning organisation’. It is preferable to think of the ‘learning organisation’ as an ideal to be constantly striven for, where the journey is more important than the destination.

Dilemmas

The process of developing the instrument was valuable in surfacing dilemmas pertinent to the experience of those in the Expert Group. Dilemmas became evident when experts expressed their qualms about the criteria. Dilemmas became apparent in three different ways: qualms about the items generally; qualms about specific items; and opposing relationships between items. Table 3 shows the dilemmas identified in each of these ways.

Table 3 Dilemmas by Means of Identification

<p>Qualms Regarding Items In General:</p> <p>Generalised versus Particularised Descriptions</p> <p>Emotionally Neutral versus Emotionally Engaged</p> <p>Qualms Regarding Specific Items:</p> <p>Learning as Instrumental versus Learning as End in its Own Right</p> <p>Opposing Relationships Between Items:</p> <p>Knowledge Sharing—Self Reliance</p>
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As discussed earlier, measuring learning organisations involved reconciling the need to make criteria generalised so that organisations can be compared, and allowing for the particular description of unique aspects of an organisation’s experience.

While an organisation may seek to be objective in its approach to learning, learning is by nature a process associated with a high degree of emotional engagement. The dilemma of whether to view learning from an emotionally neutral or an emotionally engaged stance has a significant bearing on any attempts to describe learning organisations. Many approaches to description seek to be analytical and objective; that is, emotionally neutral. This has the potential to create a mismatch between the values of those undertaking the descriptive work

and the values of those being described. People in organisations being described in this way would be left with significant qualms about the way the measures that had been used.

Organisations also face a dilemma regarding activities that might be used as a basis for description. Activities such as rewarding learning efforts may be viewed as either (a) instrumental in encouraging learning, or (b) peripheral to the purpose of learning and a potential distraction from what is really important. Learning itself may be viewed as either an end in itself, or a means of pursuing the organisation's vision.

Kim (1993) has discussed this measurement dilemma in relation to organisational learning. He contends the learning which is of greatest significance is that which affects the mental models of people within the organisation. Thus, for measurement to be meaningful it would need to explore these changes rather than focus of more surface level changes to the organisation.

Finally, organisations have the dilemma that pursuing one goal, such as Knowledge Sharing across the organisation, may be in opposition to another goal, such as building Self Reliance. People may pursue learning in order to become independently capable or self reliant, a goal that may make them less inclined to forming interdependent learning relationships with other groups or individuals.

Often a Delphi process is designed so that opinions continue to be fed back to contributors until a consensus is reached. In this study, participants generated criteria that surfaced dilemmas. The standard Delphi process would be likely to produce criteria that oscillated from one 'horn' of a dilemma to the other, with, for instance, criteria being too emotionally neutral in one round of the process and too emotionally engaged in another. Dilemmas need to be reconciled by learning and design (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000): something the Delphi process would not achieve.

Describing Learning Organisations

The Delphi process highlighted some of the reasons that measurement and description of learning organisations is a challenge for those working in the area. The expert group participating in the study had no difficulty generating criteria that could form the basis for a measurement system. At the same time, however, the process surfaced dilemmas that would need to be reconciled if a measurement system was to truly represent the common understanding of these experts.

A particular concern was that measurement might encourage people in organisations to focus efforts on scoring well on according to measures rather than engaging in real learning.

This concern is one that has been expressed by many working in the learning organisation area (Johnson, 1999; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth & Smith, 1999).

When academics and researchers warn that the learning organisation is “a journey rather than a destination” they are, at least in part, expressing qualms about how measurement might be used. The danger is that organisations will use measures to set goals for learning which, when achieved—at least according to the measure used—will bring an end to the learning effort. Were this to happen, the measurement system used would be encouraging people to think in ways antithetical to the values and mental models of the people responsible for designing the system.

There are good reasons to want to use measurement to describe an organisation’s learning efforts. Measurement makes possible comparisons between organisations and evaluation of interventions. Measurement can be used to initiate and sustain change. This study has highlighted that measurement systems must be carefully designed so that dilemmas, apparent to experts working in the area, can be reconciled.

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