

What makes a successful learning organisation today?

In his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge described the learning organisation as a place where ‘people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.’

What are the key elements of a learning organisation in today’s world?

Listening

A modern learning organisation is a listening organisation. In our fast-paced world, many businesses are adept at reacting very swiftly to every challenge. While this can be valuable, sometimes a more considered approach can lead to a more sustainable solution. Taking time to actively listen to colleagues can lead to revelatory results. Managers who are both open to new ideas and flexible enough to implement them often succeed through innovation.

Coaching

In successful learning organisations, there is a coaching ethos. When coaching is viewed as a process, it can become a ‘tick-box’ activity and the benefits are limited. However, when coaching is used as an everyday skill, it can help to nurture learning and boost performance. By asking questions managers are inviting others to reflect, to learn and therefore to be more committed to change.

Coaching conversations therefore help to personalise learning. As the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to learning becomes a thing of the past, coaching is a helpful way of encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own development.

Culture

A positive and supportive culture is key to a successful learning organisation. So for example, a customer-focused culture, where the customer is at the heart of all activity, is more likely to lead to a reputation for great customer service than an organisation which relies solely on customer service training. In a collaborative culture, where team working and shared goals are the norm, collective learning experiences are more likely to happen.

Differences of culture can occur within larger organisations, particularly if they operate on a global scale. Learning organisations can turn these challenges into opportunities for learning. By taking ideas from elsewhere and using them in a way that works for us, we can accelerate improvement.

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Integration

Two types of integration can help create a successful learning organisation. The first is integrating different elements of your business. Breaking down silos can really help to promote shared learning and presents opportunities to learn from best practice in different areas. Collaboration is an essential element of a great learning organisation.

The second type of integration is assimilating learning and development into everyday working life. Many organisations are moving away from reliance on event-driven development activities. In successful learning organisations, learning is a combination of learning events, learning from others and learning through experience.

Openness

Just as customers today are demanding more transparency from business, so people inside organisations are demanding this more from each other. Employers are more open about the 'deal' between the organisation and the employee. People want to know what's expected of them, are keener than ever to shape their own career paths, and eager to take responsibility for their own development.

An openness to new ideas and a willingness to take ideas on board lies at the heart of the successful, modern learning organisation.

And finally...

Not everyone will get it, and sometimes that's okay. So be proactive about giving people opportunities, and encourage them to take part in learning and development activities. A minority of people are likely to persist in not taking up these opportunities and not engaging when they're encouraged to. If this has an impact on their work, that's a performance management issue. Sometimes you're better off focusing your efforts where you're more likely to see positive results.