

The Learning and Healing Organisation



by Sohail Inayatullah

PETER SENGE'S brilliant contribution to management

practice is the idea of the learning organisation. What this means is that while it is always important to map the uncertainties of the future, to produce a visionary mission statement and develop a clear strategy, these are not sufficient factors for business success. What is essential is to create an organisation that reflects upon itself and learns. Managers and employees must be constantly engaged in questioning the product, raw materials, process and outcomes and outcomes—indeed, the entire core business and competency. This move from core business to core competency is part of the shift from a product-based organisation to a learning-based organisation.

Something Missing

However, there is something missing in this approach. Even though a learning organisation is about team building and other participatory processes that create more efficacious organisations, they do not touch on the crisis of the postmodern employee. This crisis is essentially about wellbeing and connection, about having meaning in one's life and working in an organisation that sustains life.

While working recently as a futurist for a State government department to develop a vision and a map of its alternative future, I found resistance from some of the mid-level managers.

One manager insisted on repeating stories of the brutality of the real world. Another, when asked to provide a metaphor for his branch, said he felt like a speck of dust swept away by the latest Ministry to take over the portfolio. A third felt there was too much change. The continuous stress of adapting to a

quicken future had led to change fatigue. At heart, the issue was trauma—not only from the external world but from inside the organisation as well. Frustration with factors beyond the control of the individuals had led to anger, both towards colleagues and themselves.

I realised that merely giving better tools to create preferred futures, while critical, was not enough, since the emotional dimension is often not adequately addressed in visioning exercises.

Instead, I invited a gestalt therapist to facilitate. He asked a range of questions, such as: What is your image of health? What is your image of sickness? What



are some obstacles in the way of health? The CEO, pay, colleagues, government policy and too much whinging were some responses. Then he asked questions such as: In what ways is leadership behaving in healthy ways? What are some things you can do today to create your image of a healthy organisation?

This exercise had shifted the managers' intention towards health.

Health Defined in Five Ways.

Individual health. Are you feeling fulfilled? What are you doing to create a healthier life?

Group health. Do you get along with others? Do you support others at work? Do they emotionally support you?

Organisational health. Are the measures just profit, or are there others, such as the triple bottom line?

Environmental Earth health. What things are you and the organisation doing to create a better more sustainable Earth (for example, recycling, energy efficiency, contributions to less privileged people, UNICEF)?

Cosmic health. In the spiritual dimension, the learning organisation is only half the story. It speaks to our intellectual selves and the part of the organisation focused on knowledge innovation. To survive rapid technological and demographic change (aging and multiculturalism), organisations must find ways to learn about learning. But there is another dimension to ourselves—the right brain, if you will. This inner side hates endless conflicts with employees and the emotional traumas that result. It desires inner wellbeing. Hierarchy is one of the structures questioned, creating more conflict as the pyramid begins to flatten and the structure is challenged by new ways of knowing, doing, and being.

A healing organisation is the second half of a learning organisation.

If we have been defined by nationhood and business over the last 500 years, there is evidence that health and healing will define us for the next 500 years. Along with the triple bottom line of people, planet and prosperity, perhaps health is the fourth dimension, or even more likely, the factor which supports the entire enterprise.

What are the obstacles to creating a healthy self and organisation? One predictor of your future health (along with behaviour) is your image of health—how you see yourself in the future. Reality and image reinforce each other.

What steps do you wish to take to create a healthier self and organisation? We know that visionary companies return over time 15 times as much in share-holder value as traditional companies. They are living organisations, defined not as structures and functions but as biological organisms focused on survival and 'thrival', developing their innate potential (Arie do Geus, *The Living Company: growth, learning and longevity in business*). Moving from survival to thrival means creating a healthy organisation. EE

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ACTION: How can you become a learning and healing organisation?