

The responsibilities of members in an organization that is learning

Nancy M. Dixon. [The Learning Organization](#). Bradford: 1998. Vol.5, Iss. 4; pg. 161

Full Text (4298 words)

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Much of the writing about organizational learning has been directed at managers to help them understand how they need to function differently in order for their organizations to learn. That writing is very helpful and very necessary. However, to direct such writing only or even primarily to managers is to imply that organizational learning is a management tool the purpose of which is to achieve management goals. Although organizational learning has already shown that it can achieve such goals, it is potentially much more than a management tool. It can change what it means to "be in" an organization - everything from the distribution of power and the apportioning of rewards to how members of the organization interact. As those who are well into the implementation of organizational learning can affirm, it creates a more egalitarian organization which shifts the distribution of power; it affects the purpose of the organization to be more inclusive; it develops a more collaborative culture. In other words, it has the potential to move us to a place we have idealized since the beginnings of the talk of participative management and empowerment, but have heretofore fallen short of achieving.

Francis Bacon (in Montague (1825)) said knowledge is power. His actual words were *nam et ipsa scientia potestas est*, "Knowledge itself is a power." What makes organizational learning so powerful is that it is a fundamental change in what we believe about who has knowledge. Organizational learning proclaims that knowledge grows out of the ongoing experience of all organizational members; it is organizational members who create and hold the organization's knowledge. That belief contrasts sharply with the more traditional belief that there are two classes within organizations, thinkers and doers. Organizational learning declares that doers are also thinkers: knowledge creators. When the source of knowledge shifts so does the power. Where knowledge is, power is.

If organizational learning is not a management tool, or not only a management tool, then it is not only managers that need to be thinking about how to make it happen or how to function differently - all members of the organization need to be considering what their responsibilities and roles are in such an organization.

This article then is directed to people at all levels of the organization as a way to begin a necessary dialogue about what our responsibilities are in an organization that is learning. However, in presenting these ideas, I am immediately faced with a language difficulty. We do not have a term in common usage that means everyone in the organization. The term "employee," in its common usage, references only those people who are not in management positions, although we would all readily acknowledge that managers are also employed by organizations. To be easily understood, I am obliged to say "managers and employees," or "people at all levels of the organization." Our language, or lack of it in this case, reflects how pervasive this division of "thinkers" and "doers" is and how difficult it is for us to conceive of ourselves as a whole. To get around this separation that our language promotes, and with the intent of manifesting a more inclusive reality, I will use the term "organizational members" in this article. The question I want to raise then is, "What should organizational members mutually hold themselves accountable for if they are committed to the organization's learning?". The question is analogous to "What should be the responsibilities of a citizen of the United States?" or "What are the responsibilities of a member of the jury?". It is a question we need to ask of ourselves whenever we are working from the assumption that the best knowledge available resides within a group of people. I offer six accountabilities here for consideration:

- (1). Actively engage in organizational dialogue that continually examines the worth of the organization's purpose.
- (2). Bring the best available knowledge to bear on organizational issues.
- (3). Function as a co-participant in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of organizational realities.
- (4). Willingly share what each knows with colleagues and create forums and systems by which that can be accomplished.
- (5). Actively learn from experience every day to develop as a responsible, participating member of the organization.
- (6). Share in the responsibility for the governance of the organization.

Actively engage in organizational dialogue that continually examines the worth of the organization's purpose

Organizational learning is often heralded as a means an organization can use to reach a desired end, such as maintaining a competitive edge or obtaining a larger share of the market. I support the concept that organizational learning can be an effective means to reach such organizational goals. I want to suggest that organizational learning is also about ends and that both means and ends are the subject of learning. This should not surprise us, because as individuals all of us have, at some time, experienced going to school or taking a new position in order to reach a goal we have set for ourselves, only to discover that the goal we were aiming for has itself altered in the process of our learning. As our understanding grew we learned that our goal was too limited or that there was a more satisfying goal that we preferred. For organizations as well, learning can result in a redefinition of the organizational goal. As organizational members think together about the work they are doing, (e.g. challenging each other's assumptions, bringing in diverse perspectives) it is likely that the organization's purpose will be questioned and sometimes enlarged or altered.

I want to suggest that not only does a redefinition of the end occur as a side-effect, but it should also occur as an objective of organizational learning. I go so far to say it is a responsibility of organizational members to engage in the continual re-examination of their organization's purpose. Any human system is in jeopardy when members view themselves as responsible only for the means, leaving it to others to determine the goal toward which the means are enacted. Means and ends are inexorably linked and need to be continually re-examined and challenged. One of the dangers we are always susceptible to is allowing means to become ends. The familiar story of the executive who wants to provide his family with a good life and so works hard to succeed in the company is apocryphal. Over time, he finds himself working harder and harder in the company, but now he is working in order to succeed in the company, while neglecting his family to do so. The means have become the end without him even recognizing that it has happened. Families are not the only system in which such paradoxes occur; most bureaucracies gravitate in this direction. Hospitals, for example, are notorious for allowing the need for order and regulation to become the ends rather than the means of providing good service. Organizational members cannot absolve themselves of the responsibility of ensuring that the goal toward which they are working is worthy and that the means has not become confused with the ends.

Organizational members' responsibility is to be cognizant of the goal (the ends) which their work serves and when, through their learning, they see ways in which the goal is limited or questionable, it is their responsibility to engage in public dialogue to challenge or question it. By "public" dialogue, I mean making their conclusions and their reasoning "accessible" to others in the organization. "Public" is the opposite of talking privately to a few friends about such issues. It means saying in a public forum (staff meeting, team meeting, intranet, townhall, etc.), "Here is a concern I have, what do others think about it?". It may mean saying it more than once. It may also mean creating public forums that provide

the opportunity for bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the ends that have been established for the organization (e.g. dialogue groups, intranet discussion groups, book review groups, brown bag lunch meetings). There has been an unwritten practice in organizations that if one does not agree, he or she can (or should) leave. While leaving is an option, leaving does little to help organizations deal with the difficult question of making sure the ends it serves are appropriate. It is only by staying and giving voice to concerns that such issues are ultimately addressed.

Bring the best available knowledge to bear on organizational issues

This responsibility is about surfacing information that is critical to addressing organizational issues. It may mean sending bad news up the hierarchy, making sure a group is included in a meeting because they have vital information, or practicing "open book management." If organizational members have information that is critical to addressing an organizational issue and choose to withhold that information, they are colluding in a way that makes them jointly responsible for the outcome. I am not talking about whistleblowing here, but about everyday courage to say what needs to be said. It is a matter of living out Argyris' governing principle of providing "valid information."

This is a very difficult responsibility to meet. Most of us do not deliberately lie, but we feel it is okay to "just not say anything." Block (1987) talks about it as caution versus courage. This responsibility requires members "...to confront an issue when others are acting as if there is no issue; to say that a meeting is not going well when everyone else seems totally satisfied. This is not a bells and whistles kind of courage.... Organizational courage is required when the sides are somewhat murky, when the issue in and of itself is less than monumental, and when we feel that top management is in fact not on our side" (p. 15).

There are many rationalizations that we use to excuse ourselves from bringing the best available knowledge to bear on organizational issues; "They don't want to hear it"; "You just don't challenge people who are in power"; "That would be a career limiting statement"; "I'm just trying to protect my people"; "They would not understand the complexities of this problem"; "There's no need to get people upset until we have more information"; and, "It's not my responsibility, I just work here." These rationalizations are disputed by this statement of responsibility. This responsibility is a challenge to top management no less than a challenge to the line; there is a shared responsibility to bring the best available knowledge to bear on any organizational issue. Organizational members cannot act in the best interest of the organization, nor in their own best interest, without complete and valid information. And certainly learning is hampered when knowledge is withheld.

There are numerous ways to assist organizational members in living up to this responsibility. There are communication skills that organizational members can develop that help to frame information in accurate but non-threatening ways. There are conditions or environments that organizational members can enact that make both giving and receiving information more likely. All of these are helpful but none addresses the central issue, which is the question of whether organizational members view this as a mutual responsibility.

Function as a co-participant in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of organizational realities

Each of us by our language and our actions (both tacit and explicit) continually creates the reality we function within. Block (1987) says, "Autonomy is the attitude that my actions are my own choices and the organization I am a part of is in many ways my own creation" (p. 15).

To function as a co-participant, members would first have to believe that they have a right to co-create and co-transform the organizational realities. This would be a big change for many organizational members who more commonly see themselves as players in someone else's game, e.g. the CEO's, the executive team's, the board's, even Wall Street's game. The statement of this responsibility requires organizational members to acknowledge that by colluding through their silence they give tacit agreement, and in so doing they help to create the organization as it exists. Further, it requires them to

accept the challenge to co-create the organization in a form that is more satisfying.

Secondly, organizational members would have to believe it is possible for the organization to change. Organizational members who have functioned within a bureaucratic framework for many years often become so resigned to the reality they experience that they believe "this is just the way organizations are", no longer recognizing that all organization forms are a product of the human mind and can therefore also be altered by human minds.

If members took this responsibility of co-participant seriously and believed the organization could change, then they would say to themselves, "Do I approve of the culture and norms of this organization I work within? Is this the kind of organization I value?". If the answer was "yes," they could consider how to sustain and build on the reality they had created. If the answer was "no," they could engage in a "public" discussion that would help to define a more acceptable culture or norms.

Willingly share what each knows with colleagues and create forums and systems to accomplish this

This responsibility is about each team or individual making what they have learned available to others: lateral communication. But it is about more than just sending an E-mail to a listserv or copying others on a memo. It is about taking an active role in understanding what others know that would be helpful to one's own unit and about taking an active role in identifying the information one's own unit has that others could use and then creating joint meetings, databases and information exchanges that meet those needs. It means assuming the responsibility for sharing knowledge.

This responsibility raises the troublesome issue of who "owns" what organizational members know. The question is not so difficult if we are talking about patents or inventions; there the answer is clear-cut and may even be written into the employment contract. The question is more difficult when, for example, a team has found a way to reduce cost on materials. Is that team responsible for sharing such information with other teams? If a salesperson has figured out a way to bundle three products so that they sell twice as much, is that something they can just use for their own advantage or does that knowledge belong to all of the salespeople in the firm? Constant et al. (1994) found in their studies, that while organizational members view tangible information, such as a computer program or a written document, as belonging to the organization, they view intangible information, such as the ability to fix a software bug or their learned experience, as a part of themselves. Viewing knowledge as part of self makes sharing information a much more personal issue, one that requires a personal commitment. Yet because sharing is by definition mutual it is not a responsibility that any one member can accept without the concurrence of others.

This responsibility then is not easily or lightly endorsed. It requires considerable deliberation among organizational members. It is surely predicated on a sense of "we" rather than "I" or "them." And the sense of "we" is influenced by such things as how organizational members are rewarded, the extent to which organizational policy places units in competition with each other for scarce resources and employment practices that encourage investment in self rather than investment in the organization.

Actively learn from experience every day to develop as a responsible, participating member of the organization

This responsibility is more than just "keeping up to date" in one's technical specialty, although that is an important responsibility in its own right. This is the responsibility to continually:

- (1). experiment (try new ways to do things);
- (2). deliberately reflect on what has happened as a result of individual or team action; and
- (3). reflect with others on the action of the whole system in order to learn how to make it function

better.

This is about having a "learning" attitude about work. It is an active rather than a passive role; being engaged intellectually rather than just complying.

There are many ways to do this, ranging from teams holding lessons learned meetings to actively tracking results. But here I am focused less on how to learn from experiences, than on the idea that it is a responsibility of organizational members; their willingness to participate in such meetings and even to call for such meetings is at issue.

And again this responsibility applies as much to management as to non-management organizational members. I am concerned that too often management has held the attitude that "we are ready to take on new ideas, it is only getting others 'on board' that is difficult." I want to suggest that management teams and individuals also need to be responsible for learning from their own experience. They need to have lessons learned meetings in which they ask themselves, "How well did we do that?", "What can we learn from how we did this, not about others, but about ourselves?", "What might we do differently next time?," and "How do we measure our performance?".

The commitment to learning is both individual and collective. Individual commitment is easier for us to invest our time and energy in, because we can take any learning we gain from our experience with us if we leave the organization. The commitment to collective learning is more problematic because it means an investment in something we may not get back, particularly in a time when organizations view downsizing as a justifiable way to reduce costs for the short run. Being willing to invest in collective learning is clearly a long-term investment on the part of organizational members; to work, it has also to be a long-term investment in organizational members on the part of the organization.

Share in the responsibility for the governance of the organization

The five responsibilities listed above pertain to organizational members sharing more fully in the governance of the organization. Governance is about making decisions in the name of the organization. In most organizations decision making is firmly rooted in the hierarchical chain, although we increasingly see the hierarchy giving up some of its decision-making privilege to teams or individuals.

Although it is widely acknowledged that teams or individuals are given decision-making authority at the discretion of the hierarchy, in actuality the converse is true, as well. That is, who can legitimately make decisions in the name of the organization is granted by those who are governed. This is perhaps easier to comprehend if we examine examples of governance that occur beyond organizational boundaries. As citizens we grant the police governance authority in certain areas, but we would not countenance their authority in other areas. If, for example, a police officer were to pull us over for wearing inappropriate clothing, like a sweater instead of a suit, we would not tolerate their authority. We would say to them, "You have no right to specify what clothing I wear." We give legislators governance authority in certain areas, but tell them to stay out of others. Governance is granted by the governed because the governed recognize the legitimization of the claim made by those in authority.

It is likewise within organizations. Most of us would accept that our bosses can specify dress code, what tasks we are to do, what hours we are to maintain, etc. If, however, our boss were to attempt to tell us how many children we should have or which church we should go to, we might see that as outside the range of the legitimate authority. We grant the organization the right to govern us in some areas but not in others. Moreover, what is considered a legitimate area changes over time as this incident from Zuboff (1982) illustrates:"

One day, in the 1860s, the owner of a textile mill in Lowell, Massachusetts posted a new set of work rules. In the morning, all weavers were to enter the plant at the same time, after which the factory gates would be locked until the close of the work day. By today's standards this demand that they arrive at the same time seems benign. Today's workers take for granted both the division of the day

into hours of work and nonwork and the notion that everyone should abide by a similar schedule. But in the 1860s the weavers were outraged by the idea that an employer had the right to dictate the hours of labor. They said it was a "system of slavery," and went on strike. Eventually, the owner left the factory gates open and withdrew his demands. Several years later, the owner again insisted on collective work hours. As the older form of work organization was disappearing from other plants as well, the weavers could no longer protest (p. 142)."

If, as I am suggesting, top management governs with the consent of employees then important questions have to be asked. Do we as organizational members consent to the layoff of 5,000 of our members? Do we consent to paying labor in Mexico one dollar an hour? Do we consent to employing children in factories in third world countries? Do we consent to pumping as much pollution into the environment as we can legally get away with?

I suggest that, as organizational members, we have a role in governance of the organization, whether or not we choose to acknowledge that role. I am suggesting we are a part of the governance structure and that we need to take that responsibility seriously.

How would we do that? By giving voice to our concerns; by demanding open access to information; by forming committees or task forces to oversee issues that we see as critical; by demanding the replacement of decision makers who make decisions that we see as wrong; by making such issues a part of the organizational dialogue.

Organizational member preparation for responsibilities

If, as I suggest in this paper, organizational members have responsibilities that go beyond compliance, then they should be about the task of considering what those responsibilities are and how to go about living them out. Organizational members should not be relegated to being the recipients of the thinking of others about these important issues (whether it is my thinking or the CEO of the company), but should be the originators and discussants of such ideas. Organizational members should be full participants in the dialogue about the responsibilities they assume.

To contemplate such ideas, organizational members will need space and time for doing so. They will need vehicles through which to make public their ideas and ways to hear and reflect on conflicting perspectives. In our current organizations there are few such forums that facilitate this dialogue. Moreover, in our organizational culture as a whole, there are few vehicles that either acknowledge the need for such a dialogue or provide access to the means to engage in such a dialogue. There are no journals directed to organizational members. The journals that deal with issues of organizational change, learning, culture, strategy, etc. are directed to managers or executives. Likewise, organizations offer programs for managers to teach them about these same issues, while offering few, if any, such programs for organizational members. Likewise with universities, courses about organizational issues are targeted at managers or those who aspire to management. Universities offer organizational members only courses in how to do their technical work more effectively, but not what it means to be an effective and responsible organizational member. There are no books or consultant practices that focus on organizational members, in no small part because it is management that pays consultants and purchases the books. This selective attention reveals our tacit assumptions, as a culture, that those who are responsible for the system, and more importantly who are responsible for changing the system, are those who are in management roles.

Over the next few years, as organizations enact their growing understanding that organizational knowledge resides within organizational members, these issues of responsibility will require careful and thoughtful attention. We do not know much about how to be an effective member of an organization that is learning. We only know how to be a member of a bureaucracy with its responsibilities spelled out by the reporting relationships of the hierarchy. We are so embedded in this model, that it is extremely difficult for us to think about new kinds of organization. As soon as we start down that road we are stopped by the roadblock of what is. Schein (1989) says, "Our thinking about these matters is hampered by one major, deeply embedded cultural assumption so taken for granted

that it is difficult even to articulate. This is the assumption that all organizations are fundamentally hierarchical in nature, and that the management process is fundamentally hierarchical. We need new models, but we may have difficulty inventing them because of the automatic tendency to think hierarchically" (p. 63). Organizational learning is an invitation to invent these new models; but we will have to invent them together. It is time to begin the dialogue.

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