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The Hallways of Learning

by Nancy M. Dixon

Hallways are the places where some of our best conversations occur. Ask any conference attendee and you are likely to hear the familiar comment, "The sessions were okay, but I had some great hallway conversations." The analogy of the hallway is a useful way to talk about organizational learning.

Learning in organizations can be categorized into three types, only one of which happens in hallways. First, individuals use their experience and training to construct meaning for themselves. When individuals keep this meaning to themselves, rather than making it accessible to others, we can liken their learning to a Private Office. For example, imagine a field representative who installs and repairs the company's product, and over time, determines that a given part fails repeatedly under certain identifiable conditions. At this point, the field representative is constructing private meaning. Unless this private meaning is shared with others, the organization will not learn.

A second category of learning is that which occurs when individuals make their personal meaning available to others in the organization. This category is analogous to the Hallways* of the organization where important exchanges take place. Hallways are places where ideas get tested against the thinking of others. As long as meaning is held privately, it is protected from the discovery that it may be wrong or limited in perspective. When it is made accessible to others, the data on which it is based can be challenged and the reasoning and logic that led to the conclusions can be examined. Hallways are places where joint meaning is made. In other words, meaning is not just exchanged, it is constructed in the dialogue between organizational members.

Richard Goldberg / Laughing Stock

Collective meaning is the third category of learning. It is the meaning that organizational members hold in common. Collective meaning is like having a Storeroom where the mementos of the past are kept. It is the glue that holds organizational members together and allows them to act in concert with each other. It provides a sense of belonging and community. Collective meaning saves the organization time. There is no need for lengthy discussions about those issues that organizational members are all in agreement about—time can be spent on more critical issues. The meaning in the Storeroom can, however, have a negative impact on the organization. In a rapidly changing world, collective meaning that was advantageous at one point in time may have become obsolete, yet it may prove difficult to change.

Hallways are the only space in which it is possible for an organization to learn. It can not learn in the Private Offices, although individual learning can certainly take place there. It cannot learn in the Storeroom, where it is only possible to affirm what is already known. If organizations are going to learn, they will need to construct Hallways in which the in-depth exploration of meaning can occur. The real hallways of our organizations will not suffice for the level of organizational learning that is necessary. Rather, organizations need to develop processes that have the positive characteristics of real hallways, yet are more focused and intentional.

Many organizations are experimenting with processes that seem to serve this Hallway function. Some of these experiments are "whole system in the room" processes such as WorkOut (General Electric), Strategic Search Conferences (Weisbord), Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs), Open Space Technology (Owens), the Conference Model (Emery) as well as more familiar Town Hall meetings. Another type of the new process makes use of teams as the unit of learning employing Action Learning (Revans) or Learning Maps (Root Learning). Yet another form is whole-system interviewing such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider). The frequency of use of such processes in organizations, which has increased rapidly over the past five years, attests to both the need for Hallways and the ingenuity of organizations in creating new forums for collective learning. SAL

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Nancy M. Dixon is Associate Professor of Administrative Science at the George Washington University. Her book, The Organizational Learning Cycle: How We Can Learn Collectively *(McGraw-Hill, 1994), discusses the above ideas more fully.*

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