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**Thinking for a Living:  
 Building Learning Communities**

*"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."*

--Albert Einstein

Organization, innovation, prosperity...legacies of triumph over chaos or tyranny, stifling tradition or superstition, deprivation and deficiency. We have the technology to analyze, invent, reorganize (simplify or complicate) to make things more predictable, comfortable.

At the same time, bureaucracy, proliferating fads and gadgets, empty consumerism...legacies of the same logical, efficient, free, and prosperous society often create their own problems and degrade quality of life.

Our children need more than more toys, activities, or achievements to become engaged citizens, caring parents, productive workers, growing adults. As workers they will need more than a spot on the assembly line, a guaranteed paycheck, a safe workplace to become capable and contributing partners in industry.

Communities need more than cost-effective services, well-kept neighborhoods, and good public relations to become healthy, nurturing places to live.

In short, the "solutions" to family, school and work, or community "problems" of a century ago have created new problems. Beyond specific troubles (drug abuse, gridlock, or pollution), more profound dilemmas (connections in an individualist culture; poverty amid affluence; meaning amid the assembly lines of life) call for new vision and capabilities built on:

- Transcendent values of love, wonder, humility, and compassion
- Practices which foster generative conversation (fresh, enriching) and coordinated action
- Capacity to see and work with life as an organic system (vs. machine or set of parts)

Source: F.Kofman & P.Senge. (1993). Communities of commitment, pp. 14-43 in Chawla & Renesch (Eds.) *Learning organizations*. Portland, OR: Productivity Press.

This newsletter seeks to outline perspectives and strategies for building such

communities of learning and action.

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**For additional resources, visit *Dreamcatcher* Family Life website**

[www.uwyo.edu/ag/ces/dream.htm](http://www.uwyo.edu/ag/ces/dream.htm)

*"It is not what the vision is, but what the vision does that matters."*

# Research and Theory: Learning Communities

## Experiential Learning

M.Kenney, S.Ralph, & M.Brown. (2000). The importance of reflection in experiential learning with community and youth workers for the learning age. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19 (2), 115-125.

Reflective skills can aid

- Appreciation of learning experiences
- Development of strengths and needs
- Building of community learning and collaboration

Effective community education can facilitate

- Mutual exchange of ideas and perspectives
- Equality and opportunity within the learning community
- A process for refining and changing perceptions

Key reflection strategies:

- Recalling experiences
- Attending to feelings
- Reevaluating experience

Training required for continuing education:

- Updating
- Retraining
- Remedial
- Broadening
- Integrative learning

## Employee Participation

J.A.M.Coyle-Shapiro. (1999). Employee participation and assessment of an organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 35 (4), 439-456.

Empirical study of Total Quality Management (TQM) indicated that

- Supervisor behavior facilitated TQM impact if employee participation/ empowerment was already in place
- Greater participation resulted in more effective TQM
- Perception of benefit from change initiative is key to participation choice
- TQM participation not related to increased organizational commitment
- Content and methods (multisystemic approach, cultural change) critical to TQM success
- Supervisor resistance/ cooperation critical to change in organization

## Organization Innovation

J.T.Hage. (1999). Organizational innovation and organizational change. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 597-622.

Notes import of complexity in division of labor. Key factors for innovation adoption: specialization, functional grouping, professionalism, technical knowledge resources. Decentralized structure aided innovation dissemination as did managers' attitudes, cooperative leadership, and openness to risk. Capacities to grasp systemic relationships and handle complex operations significantly and exponentially impact innovation efforts. Size of organization makes relatively less difference.

## Organizational Change

A.A.Armenakis & A.G. Bedeian. (1999). Organizational change: A review of theory and research in the 1990s. *Journal of Management*, 25 (3) 293-315.

Key approaches to organization change :

*Transformation*

- Transformation of employee behavior via new leadership, culture, or mission (external)

- Transactional factors like management, structure, policies, task requirements, & skills (also strategic intent, competencies, processes, resources, outputs, responses, challenges, & learning capacities)

*Context*

- Focus on internal (age, size, inertia) and external (regulations, competition) factors impacting effectiveness in adjusting to change

*Process (understanding and implementing change)*

- Change occurs in regular (slow) stages which can't be bypassed
- Mistakes can slow implementation or reverse progress

*Outcome Variables*

- Benchmarking key criteria (profitability) or standards ( error rate) Commitment (loyalty, motivation to contribute) and cynicism (trust for senior management) are key indicators of change impact/potential

# Stats and Facts

## Lifelong Learning is a Fact of Life

- *Training at work (1994-95): 22%*
- *Participants in Training: 39% of college grads, 18% high school; 27%+ for 26-54 yr-olds, 16% for under 26 or over 54 yrs.; 50/50 for men/women; 41-71% for professional/managerial, 11-22% in trades; 48% of participants benefited from work-sponsored, 52% in educational institutions or professional associations; 31% of employed, 11% of unemployed*
- *Time (47%) and cost (30%) most frequently cited as barriers to participation among interested non-participants*

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). National Household Education Survey. *Measuring participation in adult education*. Washington, DC: NCES.

## Competence Levels as Rubrics for Growth, Roles, and Mentoring

*Novices:* Beginning awareness, able to apply skills by rules; Experience difficulty with application, diagnosis

*Advanced Beginners:* Perform adequately in real settings; Experience difficulty working beyond the rules

*Competent Learners:* Full array of knowledge and adaptive skills; Still experimenting with application "know-how"

*Proficient Learners:* Ingrained skill from practice in diverse settings; Grasp and respond at a conscious level

*Experts:* Break rules to surpass goals; Internalize process and respond unconsciously; Learn via interaction with other experts

As applied to Interaction with Parents and Families...

Level 1: Interaction with families focused on practical or legal concerns

- School or organization permission forms, explanations of procedures with kids

Level 2: Information and advice on topics related to children and families (key skills involve clear, consistent talking and listening, engaging individuals or groups)

- Newsletters, parent-teacher meetings, parent groups

Level 3: Interaction at the feeling level, with self-awareness, insight, and empathy (including creating a supportive climate, identifying problems and facilitating problem solving, individualizing recommendations)

- Intensive parent education/involvement; in-depth community development

Level 4: Brief focused intervention, with awareness of own and client role in family and community systems, dynamics of change, tools and resources for fostering growth

- Short-term family therapy

Level 5: Family therapy, with extensive and intensive interview, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and change-fostering skills to help family systems in crisis

- Intensive family therapy

Source: P.Senge, A.Kleiner, C.Roberts, R.Ross, & B.Smith. (1999). *The dance of change: The challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 133-134.; W.Doherty. (1995). Boundaries between parent and family education and family therapy: The levels of family involvement model. *Family Relations*, 44 (5), 353-358,

# Dancing Through Change

## A Model of Managed Learning

MIT Emeritus Management professor Edgar Schein applies Kurt Lewin's Field Theory to change in organizations and classrooms:

- **Unfreezing:** in every system, change events (intentional teaching or unexpected crises) tend to be absorbed and adapted in ways which maintain equilibrium (minimizing boat-rocking by balancing motions or tossing rocker overboard). Changing equilibrium or balance point works when restraints (psychological defenses or group norms) are reduced. Critical processes in unfreezing:
  - *Disconfirmation—acknowledgement* of threats (frustration of needs, expectations) or opportunities (openings for creative or generative learning). Accepting (vs. ignoring, dismissing, blaming, or denying validity) and connecting new ideas and possibilities to personal meaning/concern is a first step in change.
  - *Guilt or Survival Anxiety*—openness to the impact (usually positive but feared as negative) of change on personal effectiveness, self-esteem, identity. Letting go of failure or pretense to embrace growth or exploit opportunity.
  - *Creating Psychological Safety*—reducing defenses/increasing motivation to change. Successful tactics include working in groups, parallel systems for relief from daily pressures, practice settings using mistakes to learn, encouraging visions, breaking learning into parts, personalized coaching.
- **Changing:** shifting awareness and practice of individuals as well as demands and rewards of organizational systems to a new balance point or standard. Key processes in the change process:
  - *Cognitive Reframing*—reorganizing or stretching thinking and interpretation via response to role model or trial-and-error.
  - *Imitation and Positive Defensive Identification with a Role Model*—changing perspective or practice through interaction with someone who already holds them.
  - *Scanning*—exploring alternative experiences or systems for solutions to problems identified in the “unfreezing” stage, followed by efforts to try out or apply best practices to personal or organizational realities.
- **Refreezing:** integrating new insight and behavior into personal understanding and organizational culture. Introducing new ideas to a group, encouraging open scanning and decision-making, fostering practice and “hands-on” skills, and reflecting on the standards and process of change are all critical to ownership of the process and sustaining of a new balance point.

Source: Edgar H. Schein. (1999). Kurt Lewin's Change Theory in the Field and in the Classroom: Notes Toward a Model of Managed Learning. Society for Organizational Learning: <http://learning.mit.edu>

# Dancing Through Change

*“We understand that the only competitive advantage the company of the future will have is its managers’ ability to learn faster than their competitors.”—Peter Senge*

*Profound Change*—organizational change that combines inner shifts in values, aspirations, and behaviors with outer shifts in processes, strategies, practices, and systems, is built on capacity-building to master new paradigms and challenges.

*An organization or community which cultivates learning capabilities can lead change (rather than simply react or mimic), thus remaining competitive and dynamic. Insights and tools featured below can be used by families, businesses, schools, youth groups, and community action groups to move beyond immediate goals to more cooperative, innovative, and effective engagement of life’s challenges and opportunities.*

Leaders of Profound Change include anyone willing to grow, change, and interact

**Key Learning Capabilities** (individual, organizational, community insights and skills)

- *Aspiration*: vision, goal-setting, and implementation skills to create rather than react
- *Reflection*: inquire, explore, build shared understanding, collaborate effectively
- *Understanding Complexity*: see interdependence, short- and long-term options

*“New ideas do not spring forth from people at the front lines because they are too intimidated to stick their neck out.”—Peter Senge*

Profound Change is reinforced and Learning Capabilities strengthened when...

- Initiatives enhance personal results (productivity, sense of meaning or joy in work)
- Committed people form networks (usually informal) to reflect and experiment
- New strategies and outcomes produce better results in everyday settings

## **Prerequisites for Creating a Climate for Change**

- Shared commitment among learners/colleagues
- Discussion of complex “undiscussable” issues using reflection and inquiry skills, ground rules promoting openness and respect
- Thinking and acting as an interdependent system to optimize individual talents

## **Insights on Fostering Change**

- Organizations are beneficiaries or victims of members’ thinking and action
- Change requires openness to change in thinking and action
- Leadership—by coercion or charisma—cannot “will” profound change
- Organizational learning, including new ways of organizing and working together, are critical to increasing diversity, commitment, innovation, and talent

## **Rules of Innovation**

- New ideas or initiatives almost always start with a few people
- New efforts generally start small and grow slowly
- Dreams and skills are greater assets than detailed plans
- Fix crises first, then move on with the long-term plan
- Use boundaries, barriers, and setbacks to find growth paths

# Dance Through Change

Families, Organizations, and Communities committed to staying close, having fun growing up, and interacting creatively with neighbors and clients must be intentional about goals and strategies. Time, old habits, and fear of change can easily steal their creative potential. Typical dilemmas and solutions for each community-building/change-implementing stage listed below.

## ***Starting the Change Process (Building a Learning Community)***

- *Not Enough Time*: workloads, scheduling, lack of “think time” block innovation
  - prioritize/mutually commit; combine related projects; link learning/brainstorming to ongoing projects
- *No Help*: coaching and support for planning, implementing, evaluating new ideas
  - recruit outside help; note member skills and look for mentoring opportunities; set/reinforce vision with each task; learn from blocks and conflicts
- *Not Relevant*: new ideas and strategies not seen as related to productivity, goals
  - involve leaders in setting, articulating new plans; experiment with pilot efforts and compare results; make available capacity-building resources
- *Walking the Talk*: leaders of change fail to model or support new initiatives
  - leave room for error and learn from mistakes; practice patience and accountability with leader/mentor coaches and reflection skills

## ***Maintaining the Energy for Change (Extending the Learning Community)***

- *Fear and Anxiety*: openness and honesty trigger emotional reaction
  - start with small issues; embrace differences and difficulties; build interpersonal skills but set cut-offs on destructive conflict; give up on rescuer or expert roles; slow down and redesign as needed
- *Assessment and Measurement*: finding appropriate measures of process and results (when vision, goals, pace of change, final outcomes are different or not yet known)
  - accept time delays; carefully examine current measures; recognize progress; value and utilize all members’ ideas and efforts
- *True Believers and Non-believers*: organizational suspicion of pilot group efforts
  - increase efforts to translate, demonstrate new strategies in current settings; provide time and room for changing; include all and have fun

## ***Infusing New Ideas into Everyday Life (Maturing a Learning Community)***

- *Governance*: changes in procedures confuse or unsettle persons and units
  - interpret new rules, roles in light of overall values, needs; model small changes; continuously dialogue, reflect, improve; increase individuals’ ability to make/see a difference; include leaders in accountability plans
- *Diffusion*: new methods may not work (as fast, as well) beyond a pilot group
  - empower a variety of coaches to model, spread new ideas; include new members in research, experimentation
- *Strategy & Purpose*: new direction, processes must be related to personal meaning
  - explore results, ethics, opportunities for individuals as well as organization

Source: P.Senge, A.Kleiner, C.Roberts, R.Ross, & B.Smith. (1999). *The dance of change: The challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 133-134.

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# On the Fly Through the School of life

Discipline, a pattern of continuous training and practice, is critical to growth and coping in any age or environment. In a fast-paced, interconnected world with changing rules and boundaries, the quality of reflection (mental disciplines) and action (work and play disciplines) shapes quality of life and effectiveness. Systems thinking, the first of the Five Disciplines of the Learning Organization (Senge, 1990) offers a training/living paradigm by which families, organizations, and communities can meet contemporary challenges effectively.

## Systems Thinking

*System*: the parts (people, objects, events), their connections (time, space, ideas), and the whole (properties, processes) of any organism or organization. Recognizing dynamic patterns of development, interaction, and adaptation is critical for understanding and changing systems...and for transcending the process of separating and analyzing that misses "the big picture." Five ways to look at organizations as whole systems:

- **Open Systems**: a living organization engaged in continuous *input, transformation, and output* of resources
  - Ex: Does a community respond to youth achievements as well as mischief? Which achievements? What response?
- **Social Systems**: *patterns of relationships* seen in social group interaction; perceptions of rules, roles, rewards, power, pride, and attention; and consensus/action on purposes.
  - Ex: Who has access and influence in shaping a community's care of youth...and how does that shape belonging or participation among youth and adults?
- **Process Systems**: *flow of raw materials* (ore or ideas) and infrastructures which regulate production of goods and services (business) or development (family, child/youth organizations)
  - Ex: How does community economic development create opportunities or barriers for youth to engage in job shadowing or entrepreneurship? What steps will help organize, mentor, support, or evaluate such programs?
- **Living Systems**: *each group organizes itself and seeks a niche* in which it can prosper, flourishes when natural growth is nurtured
  - Ex: How can communities support existing groups (families, clubs, schools, churches, neighborhoods) to nurture and share leadership with youth "where they live"

Other disciplines: Personal Mastery (spiritual wellness, skill competence); Mental Models (frameworks for perceiving, acting); Building Shared Vision (personal commitment to consensus); Team Learning (regular, intentional efforts to plan and implement projects, brainstorm opportunities)

Source: P.N.Senge. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday. Note: The Fifth Discipline paradigm describes the tools of healthy learning communities (at any time and place). The quality and consistency of personal and organizational practice of these disciplines is critical to their impact on quality of life and effectiveness.

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# Using limits to Grow

Learning communities—groups of family, friends, associates, organizations, or geographic communities—cannot interact for long or accomplish much without conflict. Conflict describes differences in values, perceptions, goals, strategies, capacities, or preferences which create tension within or between persons. Awareness of one's own conflicting feelings or goals can bring anxiety. Working through the origins, operations, and options of the conflict can lead to clearer understanding and effectiveness—often by accepting and learning from limits.

## Processes for transforming conflict into growth

### *Self-discipline:*

- Recognizing stress cues (anxious movements, anger, tense muscles or breathing, stuck-ness, ineffective listening or speaking)
- Centering (calming, refocusing energy lower in the body)
- Deep, steady breathing to increase blood flow, decrease tension
- Enhanced awareness of observations, interpretations, feelings, desires, and actions to calm, clarify, and express yourself

### *Interactive discipline:*

- Recognizing imbalance in individuals or systems brought about by pressure to change (withdrawal or confrontation, confusion or ambivalence, ineffective use of resources, unclear communication)
- Accepting resistance (hesitation, objection, opposition, indifference, rejection) as indicators of comfort zones (familiar beliefs, behaviors) which define both the boundaries of current functioning and roots of future connection and growth
- Recognizing that comfort zones constrict under pressure (demands which threaten or stretch invoke self-protection responses)
- Allow the other person to lead by explaining the facts, beliefs, feelings, or hopes that shape his/her comfort and willingness to change.

*Breathe deeply and listen openly.*

### *Creative discipline:*

- Focusing on long-range purposes (reaffirming or redesigning objectives)
- Using resistance to build greater clarity, consensus, and collaboration to the learning and acting process (slowing down, refocusing, playfully exploring the edges of growth rather than diving into the middle, negotiating, coaching, sharing leadership, collaborating, giving up or reassigning tasks too far beyond comfort zones)

Sources: S.Miller, D.Wackman, E.Nunnally, & P.Miller. (1989). *Connecting with self and others*. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communications, pp.253-270; P.Senge, A.Kleiner, C.Roberts, R.Ross, & B.Smith. (1999). *The dance of change: The challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 133-134.

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# Resources and Policy

## Data on Lifelong Learning

National Center on Education Statistics  
<http://nces.ed.gov/>

US Dept. of Education  
Office of Vocational and Adult Education  
[www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/)

Distance Education and Training Council  
[www.detc.org/](http://www.detc.org/)

Skill Standards Network  
<http://steps.atsi.edu>

Employment and Training Administration  
[www.doleta.gov](http://www.doleta.gov)

America's Job Bank  
[www.ajb.dni.us](http://www.ajb.dni.us)

## Understanding/Managing /Fostering Change

***Fifth Discipline Fieldbook***  
Lessons from successful organizational change endeavors, with skill exercises and insights for fostering learning communities  
[www.fieldbook.com/sol.html](http://www.fieldbook.com/sol.html)

**www.systems thinking.com**  
Resources and links on all aspects of learning and community for business, schools, informal ed.

## The Learning Organizations Homepage

Resource materials on leadership, innovation, organizational change.  
[www.albany.edu](http://www.albany.edu)

## Resources for Promoting Positive Change

PEPNet: Promising and Effective Practices Network  
A non-profit offering standards and resources for improving effectiveness of youth development, workforce development, and quality management  
[www.nyec.org/pepnet/](http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/)

## Books on Organizational Change and Learning Communities

P. Bernstein. (1995). *Best practices of effective non-profit organizations*. New York: Foundation Center.

D.L. Dotlich & J.L. Noel. (1998). *Action learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

J.A. Barker. (1992). *Paradigms: The business of discovering the future*. New York: HarperCollins.

C. Argyris. (1992). *On organizational learning*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

E. Langer. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

## Traits of organizations which succeed amid rapid change

**Focus:** Priority on areas for success, with high standards of performance/service  
**Fast:** Individual autonomy to innovate. exploit opportunities, or problem solve  
**Flexibility:** Broader job descriptions and teamwork bridging functions and departments; continuous learning and collaboration  
**Friendliness:** Pleasurable, satisfying work environments which facilitate growth and motivation

Source: R.M. Kantor. (1995). Mastering change. In S. Chawla & J. Renesch (Eds.) *Learning organizations: Developing cultures for tomorrow's workplace*. Portland, OR: Productivity Press, pp. 70-83.

## Change Rules

It takes only one person to change a system—you or me—by changing the next step.  
If it takes only one person to change a relationship pattern, then that person is me.  
If what I am doing is not working, I should stop doing it and do something else.  
Nothing works all the time.  
--S. Miller, D. Wackman, E. Nunnally, & P. Miller. (1989). *Connecting with self and others*. Littleton, CO: Interpersonal Communications, p. 27-28.

## Paradoxes: (Don't) Try to Change

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly notes the relationship between learning and growth experiences and well-being. Active learners experience intellectual and emotional highs of “flow,” where all systems are enthusiastically engaged (as in childhood curiosity). This thrill of “being in tune,” “living on the edge,” or “optimizing growth potential” seems to include a blend of left brain (logical problem solving) and right brain (intuitive, creative, playful) thinking.

In the best of experiential learning (experience, share, process, generalize, apply), these modes of thinking are blended. Too often, our own learning (alone and together) keeps each side in different boxes. How much richer life and learning would be if we tried:

- Turning research or lesson preparation into a game (including goofy uniform and rewards, backwards or upside down play with ideas discovered)
- Reflecting with youth about lessons learned from play or outdoor activity (feelings experienced, skills gained, insights and applications made)
- Using conflict as a signal for a more relaxing and fun activity
- Getting to know (in person, online, through books or workshops) someone in a different field or different part of the country
- Using events of a personal or interpersonal conflict to understand human nature or social needs...then sharing insights and solutions not as advice but as discussion starters
- Use of fantasy, curiosity, or humor to design programs or guide professional development

The insights and tools in this newsletter can help individuals and groups grow and change. Sometimes this means using them logically and intentionally. Other times, they may serve as a general knowledge base and catalyst for spontaneous and unplanned change. Mixing such insights with fun and wellness holds the best potential for achieving “flow” as persons or groups.