

Are we short-changing the potential for sustainable change? Identifying an apparent cringe towards learning in the Australian workplace.

**Dell Dennis
UWA Business School
University of Western Australia
Perth, Western Australia**

Whilst there are exemplar organisations who work towards developing a learning culture as a means of transforming themselves in response to the wider forces of change, the reality is that creating a learning organisation approach to change remains for many organisations, an elusive goal.

Undermining the potential to achieve this goal is emerging evidence that Australian organisations are reluctant to provide more than the fundamentals of associated training when change is planned and implemented, with expenditure on training provision in the Australian workplace having decreased between in recent years. Although training is not a panacea in itself, it is a crucial component in developing the attitudes, behaviours and skills necessary to action and sustain workplace change, in partnership with consistent management advocacy for change, and appropriate organisational systems, and networks to support change. Even with this knowledge, training and workplace learning are still commonly viewed in Australian work settings as a short term cost, rather than a long term investment.

First, this paper substantiates the emerging *cringe*, or *shying away* from the need for adequate training and ongoing learning in the Australian workplace. It then reiterates the value of fostering a learning culture as an essential component of the change process, and finally, it focuses on Human Resource Planning as a means to enhance the alliance between learning, management, and organisational systems, with the aim of providing those responsible for change with greater direction in achieving their organisation's change potential.

Introduction

Literature relating to the learning organisation is vast and ever increasing, yet the reality of the learning organisation still appears in many instances, to be illusive (Coutu 2002; Daft, 2001; Dennis, 1998; Dixon, 1999; Marsick, 1997). As early as 1988 it was stated that learning is no longer separate activity that occurs either before one enters the work place or in remote classroom settings. Nor is it an activity preserved for a managerial group. The behaviours that define learning and the behaviours that define being productive are one and the same thing. Learning is not something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity; learning is the heart of productive activity (Zuboff, 1988: 395).

Even with this early alert, Marsick (1997) found that '... the research on organisational learning is still oriented far more toward conceptualisation than to advice about which practices lead to desired results' (p: 1). Moreover, although Dennis (1996) argued that '... carefully developed training is a fundamental component of the ongoing development and growth of successful organisations' (p: 237), her later research found that there is '... generally only limited awareness within organisations of the complex considerations and holistic approach necessary to create the reality of a learning organisation' (Dennis 1998: 2).

Although this shortfall in achieving the learning organisation is widespread, there is emerging evidence that an additional problem exists in Australian settings whereby workplace training and learning are actually declining rather than increasing (Kramar 2001; Voicey, Baty & Delaney 2003). Such a decline has the potential to not only impede the realisation of the learning organisation, but also undermine efforts in achieving sustainable workplace change.

In attempting to articulate these issues more clearly, and in response to the conference theme of *partnerships* and the focus of *changing organisations*, this paper substantiates the emerging *cringe* or *shying away* from the need for adequate training and ongoing learning in the Australian workplace. It then reiterates the value of fostering a learning culture as an essential component of the change process, and finally, it focuses on Human Resource planning as a means to enhance the partnership between learning, management, and organisational systems, with the aim of providing those responsible for change with greater direction in achieving their organisation's change potential.

An apparent cringe towards workplace learning

Workplace learning and training, although much promoted as a major part of workplace reform in Australia in the early 1990s, and underpinned through the Federal Government's Training Guarantee (Administration) Act of 1990, have not been sustained since the legislation was set aside in 1994 (Dennis, 1996). Indeed, more recent research has shown that investment in training and development is decreasing in Australian workplace settings (Kramar, 2001).

Training is an enabler, an intervention strategy or tool which can be used to facilitate change, yet it is constantly undervalued, underestimated and even overlooked in many change efforts (Dennis, 1998; 2002). Whilst training is not the only intervention strategy available, such disregard for this enabler can prematurely inhibit the potential success of any proposed change, which in turn, has the potential to undermine the continuing success of the organisation (Dennis 1996; 2002).

Evidence which highlights this cringe or *shying away* from training in the Australian workplace include:

- Research undertaken across fifty seven auto assembly plants in various settings (ie: cohort based on actual location of setting and country of ownership groupings), investigating in part a comparison of training hours for production workers operating under flexible production methodology, found that training in Australian settings was the lowest in the cohort on two major accounts: newly hired production workers - hours of training in the first six months; and experienced production workers - hours of training per year for those with over one year of experience (MacDuffie & Kochan 1995: 156).
- In a study based on 420 useable responses focusing on the take-up of Continuous Improvement (CI) programs in companies across the manufacturing industry in Australia, the majority appeared to concentrate on training in simple CI tools, which could be rapidly implemented rather than those tool which required longer term planning and data collection. The research also found that although 81% of firms in the survey trained some people in CI problem solving tools, these firms trained on average just 27% of their employees in these tools (Mellor, O'Mara & Ryan, 2000).
- Research by Wu (2003) into team empowerment behaviours noted that evidence of supervisory team empowerment behaviours, including related training '... was consistently low' (p: 210).
- The percentage of employees, particularly managers, professionals and clerical staff, receiving more than three days training per annum in Australia compares '... very unfavourably to other countries' (Kramar 2001: 23).
- Australian organisations fall behind the global average in the number of training days provided for employees. On average Australian organisations provide 2.4 training days per employee per year, where the global average is three training days (Voicey, Baty & Delaney 2003).

This emerging evidence of a decline in workplace training in Australia as both a means of providing information and awareness raising in relation to proposed change, as well as a means of ongoing skills and knowledge development, should be cause for considerable concern. For this reason, it is timely to focus on why a learning culture is important in relation to workplace change projects.

Fostering a learning culture

In today's changing world, creating and sustaining a culture which supports learning is essential to all organisations. Indeed, an '... organisation's very survival depends upon how they support their people to learn and keep on learning' (Landale, 1999: xxxiii), to the point where

the voice of the training and development function now demands to be heard at every stage of the business cycle from planning to review; it is also central to any change strategy, and is key to the development of each individual manager and every team project. In fact, from the assessment process a person goes through when they are recruited into a company, to the counselling they may receive when they leave, it is apparent that training and development has a central role to play (Landale 1999: xxxiv).

The importance of training and development in the workplace is further highlighted in relation to ongoing or continual improvement procedures and strategies. Such improvement actions require specific planning as part of the organisation's overall strategic plan to ensure that opportunities for ongoing learning at individual, group and organisational level are effectively incorporated in the organisation's systems and work practices (Dennis, 1996; 2002). Training and development is recognised as a significant contributor to an organisation's competitive advantage, and to sustain such an advantage, organisations will need '... to learn better and faster from their successes and their failures' (Marquardt, 1997: 3). This will only occur however, if appropriate systems and work practices exist, and if a supportive learning culture is fostered and continually supported by management.

In underpinning these requirements, there are three additional considerations. First, the above requirements will only be effectively established if there are *specialised personnel* available who can plan for, then develop and formalise these factors (Dennis, 1996; 1998). Second, such actions require that an *appropriate budget* be established; one which is regarded as a long term investment because such actions are ongoing rather than achieved in a short period, (Dennis, 1998), and thus should be reflected as an ongoing cost centre. Finally, there should be an *appropriate time frame*, including adequate lead time when developing and implementing new systems, procedures and related training because in creating readiness for change, employees need time, and this time span is '... usually more than companies are willing to allocate' (Sawhney & Zabin 2003:2; Dennis 1998).

If, as Rowden (1997) suggests, that a '... literate, educated, inquisitive, problem solving workforce is essential to the survival and competitiveness of business and industry' (p: 3), then it can be anticipated that with the requirements as outline above in place, ongoing opportunity for learning will increase and assist organisations not only in achieving a competitive advantage or edge, but to also maintain such an edge. Indeed, Rowden (1997) advocates that a '... labour force that has learned how to learn and continues doing so can give a company a powerful edge' (p: 3). Such an 'edge' however, implies readiness for change, but it is noted that despite the effort involved in change management programs, few companies fully achieve their original change goals (Matthews, 1994; Coutu 2002; Sawhney & Zabin, 2003). This lack of goal achievement can, to a great extent, be attributed to inadequate or inappropriate training and learning opportunities in the change process (Coutu 2002).

We know that learning and work are inextricably linked, including not only comprehending existing knowledge, but also the creation and comprehension of new knowledge. 'In the knowledge age, the new currency is learning. It is learning, not knowledge itself which is critical' (Dixon 1999: 1). We also know that organisational change is about effectively moving those impacted upon by the change from their current

end-state (what is currently done or known) to the new or *desired* end-state (Dennis, 1996; Daft 2001), and the means by which this ‘move’ or readiness for change is achieved is through awareness raising and learning. Organisational learning does not in itself define the new or desired end state, but rather learning is “. . . the process that allows the organisation to continually generate new states’ (Dixon, 1999:4). Therefore, it can be argued that effective and sustainable change is greatly dependent on there being adequate and appropriate opportunities for learning throughout the change process, but it is likely that only through careful planning will such awareness raising and learning opportunities be created. Thus for learning to be of value to an organisation, it should be part of a *planned approach* to organisational change, with a view to developing what Sloan (1994) refers to as an effort to build a ‘. . . genuine learning culture’ (p: 20).

Planning as the nexus

Planning in relation to creating opportunity for ongoing learning as well as for learning in preparation for change is an issue that is not always given serious and *sustained* attention beyond the initial planning stage (Dennis, 1996; 1998; Sawhney & Zabin, 2003). As a key aspect of management function, it can be anticipated that effective planning in these areas holds the key to not only fostering a learning culture, but also in achieving successful change outcomes as the pressures and influences of the competitive environment impact on organisations.

Planning in relation to learning and change is no different to planning for other strategic issues. Similar to other issues, planning for learning and change go beyond the development of the organisation’s strategic business plan. It requires ongoing planning at all relevant levels as these issues move down-the-line, as well as including ongoing monitoring and evaluation as planned actions are implemented. This will sometimes be straight forward, whilst other times it will require review and re-planning particularly when it reaches the action stage: a type of two steps forward and three steps back routine, closely aligned to action research and action learning models (Dixon 1999; Revans, 1982) until planned actions are successfully embedded in the organisation’s systems in line with the organisation’s strategic plan and overall goals.

Although such planning will be incorporated in the overall strategic business plan in general terms, it is likely that subsequent and more detailed planning will be undertaken under the auspices of Human Resource (HR) department where increasingly, change projects and training sections are ‘housed’. Even though HR planning is increasingly recognised as important in the contemporary organisation, it does not however, appear to receive the attention it should. Indeed, there does not appear to be any great ‘. . . rush or increased interest in human resources planning’ (Macaleer & Shannon 2003: 15).

This shortfall in HR planning presents a dilemma in that more recent literature urges that HR planning should be closely aligned with an organisation’s strategic objectives and plans (Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich & Eichinger, 1998; Macaleer & Jones, 2003), yet it is slow to be realised. And it is *this shortfall* which may well be the weak link which impedes the realisation of the learning organisation and which undermines efforts in achieving sustainable change.

Conclusion

Carefully developed learning opportunities are a fundamental component of the ongoing development and growth of successful organisations (Dennis, 1996; 1998; 2002; Dixon, 1999; Mardquart 1997; Rowden, 1997). They are however, not easily achieved as actions which support learning and change in relation to organisational growth are complex and require careful planning to be realised. With learning being ‘. . . the heart of productive activity’ (Zuboff, 1988: 395) there needs to be far greater emphasis on planning at both executive and HR levels, with the HR professional becoming a strategic partner in the conduct of the business (Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich & Eichinger 1998; Macaleer & Jones, 2003). If such a partnership is established, it can be anticipated that learning would be more highly valued within the organisation, with change more likely sustained, and that powerful competitive ‘edge’ which is so eagerly sought, will more likely be achieved.

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