

From humour to hope – transforming organisations through learning

Dane Lukic

GCU London, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, UK

This implication for practitioners' paper is based on Issue 6 from the previous 2022 volume. The articles from Issue 6 explored training transfer ([Andoh et al., 2022](#)), team diversity and humour ([Batt-Rawden & Traavik, 2022](#)), knowledge exchange and knowledge hiding ([Kucharska and Rebelo, 2022](#)), research on stability of personality traits and its relation to triple-loop learning ([Fahrenbach & Kragulj, 2022](#)), as well as case studies on interorganisational learning ([Pareliussen et al., 2022](#)) and strategic alliances ([Ferrigno et al., 2022](#)). The Issue 6 concludes with a [Wraae \(2021\)](#) book review exploring entrepreneurship education ([Fust, 2022](#)). The Issue explores often intangible aspects of learning organisations that have very tangible impacts on learning, practices and the experience of staff and organisations that practitioners should note and explore in their own contexts.

Training, humour and embracing mistakes

The issue of training transfer into actual performance often being low is a well-known and problematic area for many companies that invest in professional development. The study by [Andoh et al. \(2022\)](#) sought to provide further evidence on how training actually affects implementation of the skills acquired. The authors provide further exploration that could help practitioners identify what makes employees use the results of their training. The study confirms that training value plays a significant role in directly motivating trainees to transfer training into their work. What is important to note is that the impact on transfer is very dependent on internal factors such as motivation to use the training results, feeling they can affect their reality and feeling engaged. Therefore, the study sends a message that human resource development practitioners need to focus on the value (both in content and perceptions around value) of the training they provide together with supporting employee internal factors. To this end, the content of the training they provide must be meaningful to trainees, usable, match their job description and efforts should be made to clarify its impact on employees' work-life as part of the general learning culture.

The study by [Batt-Rawden & Traavik \(2022\)](#) explored factors impacting learning climate at the team level in professional services in Norway. Two particular areas were explored: impact of team diversity and humour. The first aspects relevant for practitioners were the contradicting views about diversity of knowledge, especially related to rank and experience (and implicitly related to age diversity). The study highlights the importance of knowledge diversity within a team but also points to cases where institutional valuing of diversity has not been internalized by employees. If not managed well, diversity can create negative views between various team members that can limit learning. This was particularly noted for



organisations that display strong hierarchy and power unbalance. Cultivating equality in teams with power unbalance is argued to be positive for team learning capability. One of the important bridges for enabling knowledge exchange and open team climate in this study was use of humour. There are several noted uses of humour relevant for practitioners:

- Humour and team relationships, which relates to how humour reduces social distance and improves relationships;
- Humour and knowledge-sharing, which illustrates how humour eases participation in knowledge sharing; and
- Humour and social risk, which illustrates how team members consider the risk involved with the use of humour.

Humour could be used to enable knowledge exchange and innovation between more junior and senior employees and flatten the perceived hierarchy. It could also create an environment where mistakes can be “joked” about to learn from them rather than cover them up. However, the use of humour also appears to be a sensitive subject as the inappropriate use of humour in a climate that does not welcome it might have negative consequences. Both valuing differences and using humour can help team members share a sense of equality in interactions and facilitate participation despite formal power differences. The study indicates that humour should not just be an important aspect to consider but actually a serious topic explored in both management and regular employee training. Examples of training perspectives would include the negative effects of derogatory humour, mitigating power differences and increasing knowledge sharing effects through using positive humour in teams. The study concludes by stressing that humour is no laughing matter in organisational learning and that both junior and senior consultants who regard the use of humour as socially risky, should be made aware of the potential cost of not using it for team relations and exploitative and explorative team learning.

Furthering the team of supportive organisational climates, [Kucharska & Rebelo \(2022\)](#) warn that climates that do not embrace mistakes as part of learning might have poor knowledge exchange or even knowledge hiding. This paper explored knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding in light of mistakes acceptance elements of a learning culture. They remind us that error tolerance leads to many positive outcomes for employees, for example, psychological safety, self-efficacy, supportive and learning employee behaviours. Learning from mistakes and incidents, be there minor or more severe, is crucial for a learning organisation and the right environment should be set to develop rather than blame after errors ([Lukic et al., 2012](#)). What is interesting to note for practitioners is the potential tension between cultures that focus on knowledge only rather than also learning: prioritizing knowledgeable persons as more valued than agile learners. Practitioner should investigate their organisational contexts for this potential downfall, as organisations might inadvertently become places where it is better to be a person who “is always right” than the one who is “sometimes not” because being mistaken can be seen as something that diminishes professional status. The contradiction might often be found in workplace settings where mistakes are claimed to be a natural source of learning (positive attitude), yet at the same time, the professional status of people who make mistakes is diminished (negative attitude). In such a situation knowledge hiding might be motivated by individuals who keep valuable expertise to themselves to maintain their status. The study points out that a learning culture without developed mistakes’ acceptance is a kind of “learning culture illusion”! A learning culture that includes mistakes acceptance is not equal to accepting the lack of diligence and organisations need to promote practices that support both learning

form mistakes (in action, not just in policy) while working on avoiding mistakes (Littlejohn et al., 2014).

Case studies on learning across organisational boundaries

Pareliussen et al. (2022) explored interorganisational learning in a shipping industry case study in Norway, focusing on the interactions between suppliers, ship owners and ship engineers. What they found is that organisations in joint ventures that explicitly look for collaborations and opportunities for learning could achieve more interorganisational learning than organisations entering into collaborations for only operational reasons. Their study identified that learning can still happen even if the partnering is more technical, but primarily on individual and group level, with limited examples of learning becoming an organisational work practice. Removing economic barriers to learning through a change in the business model did provide opportunities for deeper learning and changing work practices. It is important to observe opportunities for learning between organisations at all levels: individual, group and organisational as this could also trigger more learning inside an organisation. It is therefore advisable to invest in developing the ability to understand how learning between companies can be fostered through three processes: learning to collaborate, learning to share knowledge and learning to create interorganisational knowledge.

Learning that crosses institutional boundaries is further explored by Ferrigno et al. (2022) through strategic alliance case studies which might have innovation and learning as some of their core reasons for linking up. Many strategic alliances are formed to spread the costs and benefits of innovation. The authors propose a matrix between different types of open innovations (inbound and outbound) and different types of learning (experimental and experiential) to derive four archetypes of alliances:

- (1) Inbound open innovation and experiential learning, illustrated by P&G and Xerox alliance;
- (2) Inbound open innovation and experimental learning, represented by L'Oréal and Founders Factory alliance;
- (3) Outbound open innovation and experiential learning, exemplified by Huawei and Leica alliance; and
- (4) Outbound open innovation and experimental learning, represented by BMW and IBM joint venture.

This matrix further detailed in the article could be used by practitioners to understand learning opportunities that could be pursued in each alliance type to boost the organisational ability to learn. The study also offers an analytical tool on types of knowledge interactions (knowledge access, knowledge generation, knowledge flows and knowledge gains) that can further aid companies to analyse and prioritize knowledge acquisition most suited for their needs.

Transformational learning, change and entrepreneurship

In the book review by Fust (2022) ["The entrepreneurial learning journey and back again. Conversations with entrepreneurship educators from around the world" by Wraae (2021)], the book is a transformational tool to inspire educators to transform the lives and outlooks of students through entrepreneurship. The author points out that entrepreneurs often do not respond well to traditional formal education, but engage well with action learning. On the other hand, it appears academically successful university students learn how to conform

and could lose the ability to take the initiative. The book is relevant not only for entrepreneurs and educators but also for other practitioners and leaders as it has valuable advice for other organisations. Entrepreneurship is unique as it deals with an unknown world and the entrepreneurial process can be messy and chaotic because of this uncertainty. But true transformation does require open to experiments, mistakes, learning from failure, resilience and a particular mindset. Large organisations struggle with some of these perspectives where stability and risk avoidance might be emphasized at the expenses of entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial risk taking (Berman et al., 2021). Therefore, the book could be a relevant pragmatic guideline on how to foster entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in various transformational change efforts.

Some good news for transforming organisations through learning also come from the paper by Fahrenbach & Kragulj (2022) who built on the research findings that personality traits are not as stable as it was previously thought. They linked the studies between personality and learning and aligned it with learning organisation contexts. Drawing on the increasing evidence that personality traits can be changed, the authors point out that experiences and behaviours in specific situations constitute the building block of long-term personality change. This research and paradigm shift evident in individual psychology can then also inform the link between a person learning and an organisation learning metaphors (Vera & Crossan, 2004). The authors draw parallels between, for example, habits in individuals and routines in organisations, or individual and organisational identity. What this paper proposes is that although individual identity and personality is hard to change it can happen through consistent bottom-up efforts and key transformative events over longer period of time. The study confirms the potential for changing even deeply rooted beliefs and practices that might not serve the organisational learning. Practitioners can explore their local organisational events, routines and identity as an opportunity to work on both bottom-up and top-down transformative organisational learning.

Articles from Issue 6 explored several perspectives around learning in organisations, highlighting the challenging and complex nature of the factors to be considered and the need for organisational change. In a comparable way, truly transforming the organisational identity, its core, is difficult but not impossible and requires comprehensive effort and time. So the Issue 6 reassures that there is still hope for both individuals and organisations as long as honest transformational change is the long-term goal, includes climates conducive to deep learning and impacting the world positively, within and outside the organisation.

References

- Andoh, R. P. K., Owusu, E. A., Annan-Prah, E. C., & Boampong, G. N. (2022). Training value, employee internal states and training transfer: Examining the web of relationships. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 674–691.
- Batt-Rawden, V. H., & Traavik, L. E. M. (2022). Fostering egalitarianism for team learning in professional service teams. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 597–614.
- Berman, A., Cano-Kollmann, M., & Mudambi, R. (2021). Innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems: Fintech in the financial services industry. *Review of Managerial Science*, 16, 45–64.
- Fahrenbach, F., & Kragulj, F. (2022). The ever-changing personality: Revisiting the concept of triple-loop learning. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 597–610.
- Ferrigno, G., Del Sarto, N., Cucino, V., & Piccaluga, A. (2022). Connecting organizational learning and open innovation research: An integrative framework and insights from case studies of strategic alliances. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 615–634.
- Fust, A. P. (2022). Book review. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 692–696.

- Kucharska, W., & Rebelo, T. (2022). Knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding in light of the mistakes acceptance component of learning culture- knowledge culture and human capital implications. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 635–655.
- Littlejohn, A., Lukic, D., & Margaryan, A. (2014). Comparing safety culture and learning culture. *Risk Management*, 16(4), 272–293.
- Lukic, D., Littlejohn, A., & Margaryan, A. (2012). A framework for learning from incidents in the workplace. *Safety Science*, 50(4), 950–957.
- Pareliusson, B., Giskeødegård, M. F., & Æsøy, V. (2022). The whereabouts of interorganizational learning: A maritime case study. *The Learning Organization*, 29(6), 656–673.
- Vera, D., & Crossan, M. (2004). Strategic leadership and organizational learning. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(2), 222–240.
- Wraae, B. (2021). *The entrepreneurial learning journey and back again. Conversations with entrepreneurship educators from around the world*. New Degree Press.