

Putting organizational unlearning into practice: a few steps for the practitioner

Simon Reese

University of Maryland University College, Adelphi, Maryland, USA

Introduction

Linkage of theory and practice is never an artless mission. Theories are occasionally viewed as abstract and therefore complicated to apply to a practical environment. Subsequently, practitioners often overlook great theories, as they are confronted with several of the same challenges that those same theories have already postulated possible steps toward resolution. To overcome the somewhat daunting task of building the linkage to practice, this summary piece aims to provide a more clear connection for leaders, managers or even individuals as they endeavor to put organizational unlearning into practice inside their organization. The author attempts to simplify the details from the diverse articles within this issue only with the aim of helping build an easier method for practical application. Often with the application of theory, the first step is the simplification of complexity for mass utilization.

The summary contains three sections to facilitate the linkage across the diverse articles contained in this issue:

- (1) summarize the dire consequences of organizational unlearning and growth in the academic papers on the topic;
- (2) outline some similarities in the phases organizations confront during unlearning; and
- (3) summarize steps leaders can take to prepare their organization for organizational unlearning.

Dr William Starbuck's article "Organizational Learning and Unlearning" outlines the ominous consequences of organizational unlearning. His studies reflected that over 50 per cent of organizations find themselves unable to survive unlearning, which results in death of the organization. With such low success rates, the increase in studies on the subject is not unwarranted. Nhien Nguyen's article "The Journey of Organizational Unlearning: A Conversation with William H. Starbuck", illustrates from 1975 to 2013 a logarithmic growth of academic papers on the topic. With these figures, it is understandable the importance of the organizational unlearning topic. Readers will find these articles enlightening on the background and consequences of the topic.

The articles outline differing phases or stages of the organizational unlearning process. Some articles consider these sequential. But, Drs. Marlena Fiol and Edward O'Connor explain how the phases or sub-processes are iterative and interactive. In an attempt to aggregate the diversity of thought across the articles, [Table I](#) below loosely



combines the phases, stages or components of organizational unlearning. Table I later helps frame steps practitioners can implement. Apologies to the authors, as the linkages in the Table I are intended as an imprecise attempt to merge the differing thoughts across all articles. Readers can uncover much greater information within the individual articles than can be provided here.

Each of the articles suggests differing insights into how a leader can prepare for organizational unlearning. Again, the articles benefit the reader with much greater details. But, here are some key implications to practice across the phases and included within the articles.

Table II provides guidance for leaders when confronted with organizational unlearning. These actions alone cannot lead to organizational unlearning. Leaders must remember that people must follow, and that many of the impacts of organizational unlearning result in negative influences on the people. Dr William Starbuck explains how the process leads employees to become demoralized, and Dr Max Visser describes

Table I.
Phases of
organizational
unlearning

	Fiol & O'Connor	Starbuck	Visser
Phase 1	Destabilization	Crises	Mismatch
Phase 2	Discarding	Weathering the storm	Interruption
Phase 3	Experimenting	Obsolescence and unlearning	Recovery
End		Death or success of the organization	

Table II.
Key implications to
practice to prepare for
organizational
unlearning

Phase 1	Destabilization—disruptions that create doubt in usefulness of old patterns Practitioner step—listen for concerns about the “way we do things” or look for changes in the environment Crises—social and technological environmental changes counter to the way the company operates Practitioner step—beware of blindness and rigidity created by your strategies and know that lack of information is not the issue—an issue is rigidity in strategy Mismatch—difference between outcomes and expectations Leader Step—monitor environment to catch problems quickly
Phase 2	Discarding - unlearning of deeply embedded routines begins as an individual process Practitioner step—watch for routines or patterns that are no longer being followed (discarded). They may result from destabilization Weathering the storm—holding on to operating processes with assumptions of temporary environmental changes Practitioner step — look again at your environment and your dependence on current strategies to determine if you're blinded too deeply. Understand managers overlook information that deviates Interruption—flow of activities halted by unforeseen event Practitioner step—be alert to interruptions as soon as they occur and gather details quickly
Phase 3	Experimenting—as old patterns are discarded new appear Practitioner step—implement pilot projects that create greatest variety in creating new patterns Obsolescence and unlearning - realize core strategies must change Practitioner step— act on dramatic changes because incremental changes lead to a slow organizational death Recovery—employee collaborative reflection and inquire on interruption Practitioner step—build methods for employees to collaborate, reflect, inquire and design possible solutions to interruptions

how the process creates a threat that embarrasses the existing management. To off-set some of that negative impact, Dr Tsang points to the selection of areas of unlearning that presented the least resistance as a method to align employees quickly into the process. And, to support the iterative process, Drs. Fiol and O'Connor point to the need to continually reinforce new learning, because shadows of well-established obsolete patterns never truly disappear. All of these aspects and more play out as leaders guide their team through organizational unlearning.

The steps to organizational unlearning are messy. The best solution in practice is to catch the need for unlearning in the early phase when the crises, mismatch or destabilization is first encountered. The best implication for practice may be as outlined in Nhien Nguyen's book review and supported by Dr Max Visser. As described by Dr Nguyen, build an organization with mechanisms that can promote both learning and unlearning simultaneously, thereby eliminating the first phase in organizational unlearning. Or, as explained by Dr Visser, create a Model II climate where an open attitude and productive reasoning create an environment that facilitates reflection and inquiry.

Further reading

- Fiol, M. and O'Connor, E. (2017), "Unlearning established organizational routines – part I" *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.
- Nguyen, N. (2017), "The journey of organizational unlearning: a conversation with William H. Starbuck", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.
- Nguyen, N. (2017), "Unlearning or how not to be governed: implications for organizational unlearning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.
- Starbuck, W.H. (2017), "Organizational learning and unlearning", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.
- Tsang, E. (2017), "How the concept of organizational unlearning contributes to studies of learning organizations: a personal reflection", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.
- Visser, M. (2017), "Learning and unlearning: a conceptual note", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1.

Corresponding author

Simon Reese can be contacted at: sreese@gwu.edu