THE CONSULTING ORGANISATION AS AN ADVANCED LEARNING SYSTEM

by

David Wasdell

Produced By: Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE
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Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk

PREFACE

In July 1995 I was privileged to conduct one of the Organisational Consulting Masterclasses at London's South Bank University in association with the Tavistock Institute. One year later the material has been revised and up-dated in the light of current literature and with the further experience of working with consultant organisations in the UK, across Europe, in Israel and in the USA.

An important resource book, incorporating the Masterclass presentation, is to be published by Routledge in June 1997 under the title 'Developing Organisational Consultancy'. 'The Consultant Organisation as an Advanced Learning System' is the final version of the manuscript of my chapter submitted for inclusion in that book, and is made available here in its pre-publication form with strictly limited circulation. I hope it will encourage you to obtain and read the rest of the book as soon as it is published, as the chapters, like the set of original Masterclasses on which they are based, form an inter-dependent whole.

I am immensely grateful to Dr. Jean Neumann of the Tavistock Institute for her creative editorial suggestions, and to my wife Evelyn for her practical support in the writing and re-drafting process. It feels appropriate to be putting the final touches to the paper for delivery on my birthday!

David Wasdell
15th August 1996

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Resistance to change is never more profoundly encountered than in the process of re-learning ways of learning, of changing the way we change. 'Doing' is repetitive. It sustains performance without change. Here non-learning is the order of the day. Learning leads to evolution of performance, to change and development in the cycle of activity. Such a shift often meets with resistance even though the patterns or means of learning remain reassuringly constant. Intervene in the learning system to change those underlying patterns, and anxiety may well escalate. Learning to learn is a fraught activity with powerful built-in reactions tending to restore learning behaviour to previously known processes. This dynamic conservatism is emerging as the critical constraint in the development of advanced learning systems in organisational life. It emerges at every level of the system, from individual to global corporation, and is endemic in every form of organisation.

The consulting organisation is not immune! With attention focused on client systems, it is all too easy to become unaware of the quality and order of learning being modelled by individual consultants or the organisational systems to which they belong. This failure to "walk the talk" is evidence of lack of integrity in the consulting process, leading eventually to client disillusionment. It empowers the collusional dynamics in the interaction between consultant and client. It damps the consultant ability to stay at the leading edge of the profession, limits the ability to sustain competence in a rapidly changing and evolving field and, in the longer term, threatens the ability of the consultant organisation to survive in an increasingly competitive world.

In the accelerating complexity of today's world, the capacity of the consulting organisation to survive and thrive is determined by its ability to evolve as an advanced learning system.

The "case study" used as a framework for this chapter is a composite account, based on real-life events spread over eight years and three continents. It is interspersed with "Theoretical Interludes" which anchor the case material firmly in the emerging discipline of organisational learning. "Inter Alia" sections

invite the reader to use the text as an opportunity for applied double-loop learning in their own immediate situation.

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IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Come with me into a small conference room in the training suite of an hotel. Screens, white-board and flip-chart are all arrayed behind the presenter's table, itself bedecked with flowers, glasses, water carafe and crisp white cloth. Projectors stand like sentinels guarding the gap between presenter and workshop participants. They in turn are seated behind three sides of a continuous cloth-covered set of tables arranged as an open rectangle. The missing short side faces the presenter's table. There are a few flowers on the participants' desking, but unlike those on the top table, they are plastic. There is one carafe of water for every three participant places, each of which has a note pad and pencil. No note pad is provided for the presenter.

A video of the entry-dance as the twenty-seven members of a consulting firm took their places, would have revealed some intricate choreography. Power, gender, seniority, aggression and compliance all played their part as the crystal-structure formed and re-formed. Eventually the pattern was complete. The dominant male director of the firm sat in the centre of the short side of the rectangle, opposite the presenter. To his left the men were arranged in descending order of seniority. The co-director, a woman, sat in the central seat of the long side of the rectangle to his right, with the other women grouped around her. The most recent recruit to the team, a young trainee consultant, sat at the end of one long side, nearest the door. The gender split was not complete. One token male sat among the women and one token female sat among the men.

My brief for the day was to introduce the concepts of advanced learning systems and to enable this consulting organisation to apply the material to the dynamics of its own inner life. I was faced with a dilemma. Embedded in the setting was the expectation of a formal lecture, a familiar pattern of learning quite inconsistent with the content or the task of the day's workshop. I felt trapped in a lose/lose position. To collude with the expectations was to provide a role model of saying one thing while doing another. On the other hand, to run a dynamic workshop as I had planned would be a radical transgression of the cultural mores which could well alienate the whole group right at the start of the day. Some creative risk-taking was required.

When the introductions were complete, I moved to one of the long sides of the room and drew attention to the setting. Here was a living example of a learning system, more or less familiar, more or less effective. Participants were invited to use it as an existential case study and to reflect in pairs on the implicit assumptions about the learning process, the lines of communication and participation, and the dynamics of the consulting team revealed in the seating pattern.

During the next half hour a fascinating "learning system audit" began to emerge. Issues of power and authority were examined and the subtle signals of status were identified. Communication was expected to be mainly verbal with some illustrations. Notes were to be taken by participants, but the presenter had no need to make notes of his own. Information was directed one way with an assumption of presenter knowledge and participant ignorance. Even if information could be taken in and remembered in this way, there was little hope of its leading to significant change in practice. Dominant eye-contact was between presenter and the male director, locked into a potential battle for superiority, while those with least experience sat out of the line of fire. The male power-axis was at right angles to the female power line and the two directors crossed each other at almost every point of the process. From the presenter's position, the men sat on his right and related to his dominant verbal side, while the women were grouped on his left. They related more to his sub-dominant visual, intuitive and affective functions. Men were expected to speak while the women remained silent and held the emotions of the team. The basic assumption of the group (Bion, W.R., 1961) was one of dependency with passing of tradition from active guru to passive disciple without necessarily changing the behaviour of either.

These were institutional patterns of learning. The power dynamics were familial and familiar. The adult/infant transactions were embedded in the formal educational setting. Learning skills were learned in the home and reinforced year after year in school and university (Senge, P., 1992). They remained unexamined, almost unexaminable, since change at this level would involve reworking profoundly entrenched behaviour shot through with deep feelings of dependency and loyalty, fear and guilt. It also raised implications for transformation of dynamically conservative educational institutions at every level of society. Conserving the mores of the learning system sedated the felt anxiety about the unknown and so, paradoxically, reduced the possibility of learning.

By taking this approach the group had started on the path of double-loop learning. The first step was to become aware of the learning processes in

operation, to make conscious the implicit assumptions of the learning system. The second step was to change them.

INTER ALIA I

At this moment you are reading a book. It is a learning process designed to transfer verbal information from author to reader using skills of visual speech-pattern recognition. That is a way of learning which you learned very early in life, possibly at home even before you started school, though it has developed significantly since then. How do you read now? What changes have there been in your reading skills over the last five years? Are there any ways in which your take-up and application of information from the printed page could become more effective? Perhaps you have already tried speed-reading or even photo-reading, increasing the reading rate while improving retention and comprehension. Take a couple of seconds to scan the next page, letting your eyes roam across the text as if it were a picture. Now continue reading and you may well find the material feels somehow familiar. The visual brain centres are already processing the meaning and subsequent input through the verbal centres reinforces the learning. This mode of double-hemisphere reading with a time-lapse between inputs also helps to transfer the material from short to long-term memory (Rose, C., 1985).

The shift from passive to interactive reading opens up a whole new range of possibilities. Use a pencil, pen or high-lighter to mark key points in the text. The neuro-muscular activity reinforces learning and strengthens memory. Engage in critical dialogue with the author, making notes on the page, dictating key quotes and recording your own comments. Open a learning-log folder on computer in which to enter not only important content and your own responses, but also to generate action and application agendas which can be incorporated into work programmes with a planned time-frame and review procedure. Set up a learning contract with a colleague to review recent reading, articulate new understanding, commit to implementation and support each other in action.

Meanwhile, you are still reading a book, except that now you are also becoming more aware of the learning processes being employed and beginning to explore ways of improving them. You have entered the world of double-loop learning.

ENCOUNTERING CONSTRAINTS

Back in the conference room there was general agreement that the implicit learning system needed urgent reform if the consulting organisation were to gain the greatest benefit from the day's work. I suggested that the team could re-

design the learning system for optimum performance while I left the room and let them get on with it for ten minutes. On my return nothing had apparently changed, yet everything was different. Everyone was still sitting in exactly the same place. No decisions had been reached and no action taken. Each consultant had different ideas about the changes to be made. Consensus about the need for change had fragmented into multiple polarities reflecting the wide variety of preferred learning styles among the members. Attempts by one director to impose a single uniform solution had been blocked by the other director who insisted on a more consultative and systemic form of leadership. The simple battle of the sexes was complexified by conflict between consultants whose dominant learning modes were verbal or visual, activity-based or affect-driven. Another polarity emerged around the preference for content-based learning as opposed to experiential or process-oriented work.

The event had lifted the stone of denial and repression and revealed the seething inter-personal and inter-sub-group dynamics of the team. The outcome was stasis - the preservation of the status-quo. At a psychodynamic level the process could be interpreted as collusional maintenance of the defences against anxiety in the face of the fear of the unknown. At another level the conflicted power relations of the team were exposed. The balanced, defensive stalemate effectively aborted creativity and innovation, risk-taking and learning as an organisation. It was a culture which prohibited double-loop learning. It also mirrored the defensive dynamics encountered in client organisations when consultants tried to introduce processes of advanced learning systems. Competence in resolving this impasse within the dynamics of the consultant organisation was essential if the consultants were to have any hope of enabling second-order learning in client systems (Pedler, M., et al, 1991).

BEYOND UNIFORMITY

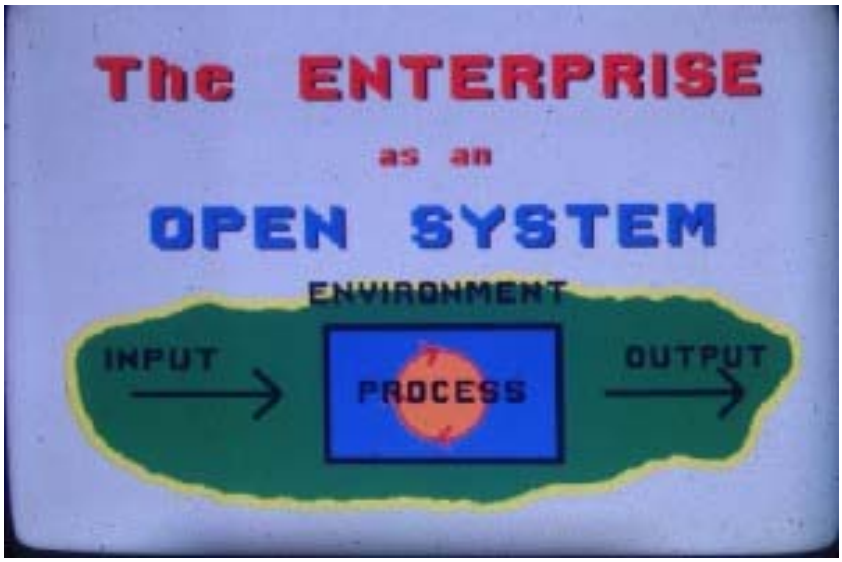
The team prided itself on its multi-disciplinary composition with skills ranging from management mentoring and team-building to accountancy, from clinical psychology and group relations training to systems simulation and information technology application. The client portfolio reflected a similar variety from tiny high-tech innovatory enterprises, through business and commerce, multi-national corporations and voluntary organisations, to educational institutions and high level military strategy training. Rich diversity was a team strength, yet, perhaps reinforced by the difficulties in handling complexity, the team was trapped in an oppressive culture of uniformity when it came to the dynamics of organisational learning.

Transforming that culture was an essential priority if the team were to develop as a learning system. The task was to introduce an awareness and celebration of differences and then to build a learning community with high levels of differentiation supported by equally strong processes of integration. As a first step the consultants were invited to build supportive threes which incorporated the highest possible level of difference, taking into account gender, age, experience, social and educational background and field discipline. Within those micro-teams, each person was offered the opportunity to identify some of the most powerful and effective learning experiences of their life, to describe them to their partners and then to collaborate in analysing why those particular processes had been so effective.

The conference room was evacuated, its furniture undisturbed, preserved as some kind of fixated symbol of conflicted frustration. The tableau maintained the memory of the familiar if dysfunctional dynamics while the parallel-processing triads began to explore the new world, finding little niches around the building and its gardens in which they could work undisturbed. As trust deepened, sharing became profound and an extraordinary diversity of learning experience began to emerge. Time passed.

INTERLUDE I: SOME THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Maps and models must never be confused with reality, but they can help us to gain an overview and give greater confidence in navigating new territory. During this interlude we explore an analytic model of the domain of learning systems which provides a framework of theoretical understanding. With its roots in differential calculus, it offers a map that begins to make sense of the complexity of real-life experience. It can help us to locate our perspective and to perceive more clearly the kinds of learning processes at work in the organisations and institutions of our everyday life.

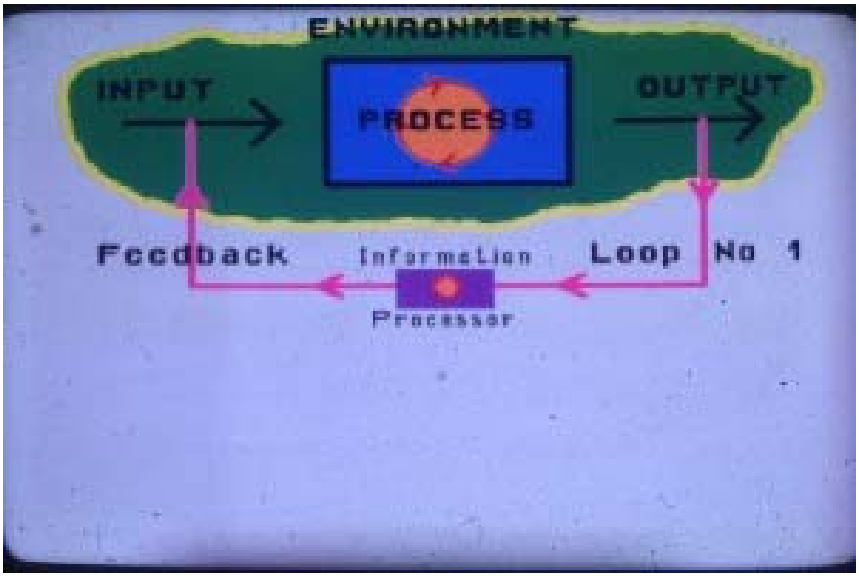


We start our journey with concepts based on open-systems analysis (Wasdell, D., 1993). Here, an enterprise or organisation is represented as a bounded field set within an environment. As an open system, the enterprise interacts with its environment via a series of inputs and outputs, while the boundary itself marks the differentiation between inside and outside. Within the boundary certain processes are applied to the inputs, transforming them before export across the boundary in exchange for rewards of money and other resources which enable the enterprise to survive and continue its task (Figure 1). In this basic model the operational system is seen as constant, unchanging and non-adaptive. Performance is repetitive and there are no feed-back loops which might generate change. Such a rigid system can only survive in an unchanging environment.

It is extraordinary that this non-learning system is still offered as an ideal goal by some managers and consultants who try to perfect an operating procedure, product, intervention or training programme with a view to its continuance without further modification. One senior OD consultant remarked that he had learned everything he needed to know about Organisation Development and was now only concerned to ensure that younger consultants entering the field should "get up to speed as quickly as possible". Another director of a consulting firm assured me that it "would take a traumatic shock" to make him aware of any

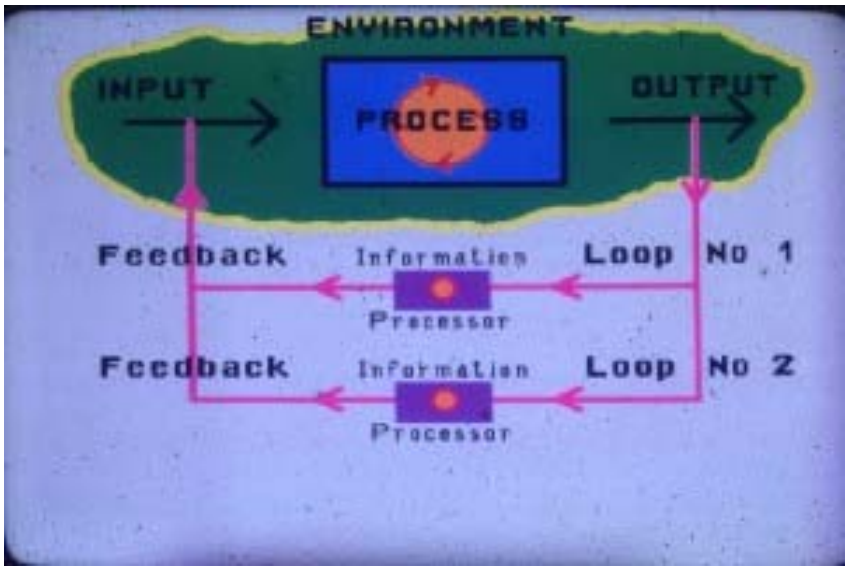
incompetence in the way he carried out his profession. In a changing world such high-performance, low-learning behaviour is doomed.

Learning, even at its most simple, requires monitoring of system performance within the environment and some feedback procedure linked to an effective performance-modifying mechanism. Monitoring may be uni-dimensional, as in the measurement of room temperature, fed back to a radiator via a thermostat. On the other hand it may be highly complex and multi-dimensional with

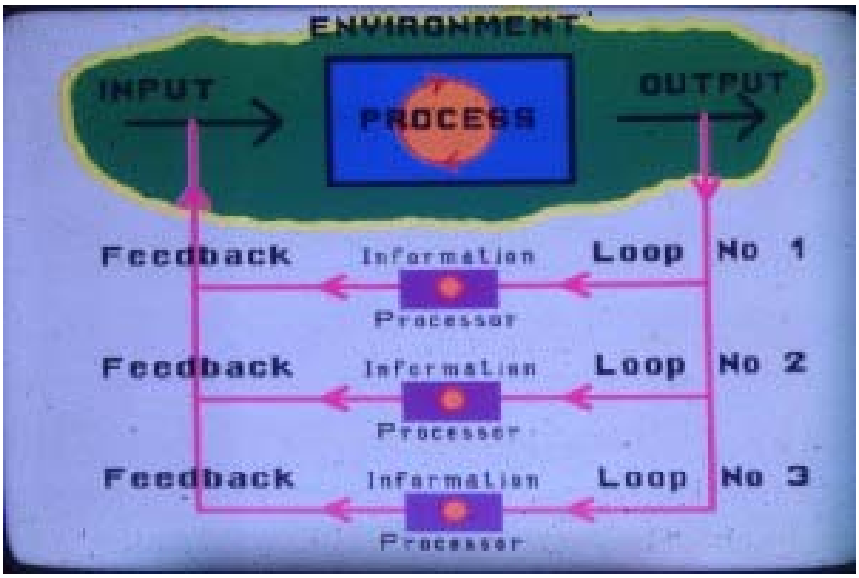


constant measurement of many variables in the environment and in the input, operating and output processes of the system (Figure 2). The information, inter-related through a network of sophisticated non-linear linkages, generates a complex set of system - modifying interventions. The system becomes adaptive, learning from its performance within a changing environment. This is a "single loop" learning system in which, once the learning procedures are in place, they are themselves fixed and non-adaptive.

The second generation learning system treats this non-adaptive, single-loop process as the operating system. Monitoring is of the learning environment, the monitoring procedures, the information-processing and feedback mechanisms. Interventions are generated which transform the basic



learning skills of the enterprise, the effects of which are in turn fed back to the first order learning loop. This "double-loop" learning system (Figure 3) is capable of continuous development of its learning procedures. It is learning to learn better. Its operating procedures are far more flexible and adaptable and as a result, the enterprise can survive and thrive in conditions of faster-moving environmental change. However, once in place the double-loop learning system is itself fixed and non-adaptive.



It is of course possible to improve the way the system learns to learn. Now the double - loop processes themselves come under scrutiny and are subject to monitoring and transformation. The enterprise has evolved into a "triple-loop" learning system (Figure 4). The powerful protocols of this third generation learning system enable the enterprise to out-perform single loop and double loop organisations and to survive in conditions of environmental rapidation which spell catastrophe to less adaptable organisms.

The rapidly evolving field of information technology has made us familiar with the concept of multi - generational development of both hardware and software. The products of one generation are used as tools to develop the products of the next. Levels of learning system are now beginning to evolve in similar ways, leading to the emergence of fourth generational, fifth generational, and higher order systems

(Figure 5). To survive and thrive an enterprise needs to operate with a learning system that is at least one order higher than that of the change processes in the environment. As smooth patterns of environmental change break down into conditions of extreme complexity, unpredictability, turbulence and chaos (Trisoglio, A., 1995), so organisations have to generate the capacity for "real-time" response requiring an appropriately advanced and sophisticated level of learning system.

The map or model developed so far offers a way of analysing the level of learning system in operation. It also provides a framework in which to examine the processes of shift from one level of learning system to the next. In practice at any given time different elements of any enterprise or organisation may be operating at different levels of learning. Coincidentally any given element of the enterprise may operate at different levels of learning at different points in time. Management of an advanced learning system requires diagnostic monitoring of the levels and processes of learning throughout the organisation and their evaluation against a backdrop of information about the levels of change in the environments of each element or sub-system. Orchestration and fine tuning of the learning system for optimum performance will also take into account expected future environmental conditions of the organisation. The timing of interventions in the learning system will depend on the dynamics of level-shift. Where resistance and dynamic conservatism are intense the learning curve of the level-shift is flattened and the lead time required for level-change is proportionately longer.

If we consider the client/consultant partnership as a single complex system, then the consultant intervention may be seen as a bought-in resource enabling management to improve the performance of the single-loop learning of the organisation. From the client perspective, the intervention is part of their second-order learning system. From the point of view of the consultant organisation, the intervention is an element of their own operating system. First-order learning for the consultant organisation improves the delivery of second order learning for the client and is therefore equivalent to triple-loop learning for the client system. Where the consultant organisation moves up-level to second, third, fourth or higher orders of learning system, the client enterprise gains access to the resources of equivalently higher learning with respect to its own operational system.

By way of illustration we can now categorise my intervention with the consultant organisation as catalysing change in its learning system from single-loop to double-loop. As a process-consultant, I was concerned that my client should internalise skills for sustained second order learning without continuous

dependence on external resources. My work represented my own operating level which is in turn subject to review and critical development (my single-loop learning). Improving the way in which that review and development is carried out constitutes second-order learning for me, fourth-order learning for the consultant organisation and sixth-order learning with respect to the operating level of their clients.

TOWARDS HOLISTIC LEARNING

At this point we leave our journey into the realms of theory and return to the workshop setting where the micro teams of consultants were re-convening. Members co-operated to strip the tables and stack them against the walls, bringing the chairs into two concentric circles in the open space in the centre of the room. One person from each triad took a seat in the inner ring with the other members in close support behind them. A rich sharing of a diversity of learning experiences followed. For some, intense learning was always in relationship to one particular individual or in a small group, others learned best while reading in isolation. A few took in and applied information through formal lectures given by an eminent expert, one or two learned only while in action, often alongside a more experienced consultant, in a kind of apprenticeship relationship. While verbal communication, whether written or spoken, was dominant for most, others required visual images if real understanding was to be achieved. Action-learning, group-dynamics and role play were crucial for a couple of the consultants, while one or two others insisted that learning without a high emotional content was without real meaning for them.

As the team reflected on its experience it became clear that any initiative of organisational learning needed to honour the wide spread of learning styles represented in team membership (Rose, C., 1985). A culture that could celebrate diversity began to emerge. Not only were differences in learning style acknowledged, but a few members began to explore the possibility that widening their own palette might enrich their learning competence in a move towards holistic learning. We were reminded of the need to expand the ancient Chinese proverb: “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand” to include “I feel and I make it my own”, so adding emotional tone and personal ownership to the dimensions of learning.

One of the advantages of a masterclass, where those already proficient gather to improve their mastery of some field or skill, is this quality of holistic, relational learning. It integrates verbal, visual, active and affective modes in the richness of a multi-dimensional field where cognitive and experiential development combine. That is a far cry from the attenuated poverty of the printed page even though it be illustrated with a smattering of diagrams. The future is not so limited by the letters of back and white and for many learners the future is already present. As Don Tapscott put it so succinctly: “If a picture is worth a thousand words, the right multimedia document retrieved at the right time is worth a thousand pictures” (Tapscott, D., 1995). Even then the isolated Website wanderer may still be deprived of that essential qualitative enhancement of learning in community.

BUILDING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The culture and relationship structure of the consultant organisation had begun to change. It was no longer a fixated group of individuals caught in an aridly polarised power struggle. It was becoming more accepting of differences and supportive of risk-taking. Each member was being recognised as a potential source of learning for all other partners in the team. From uniformity and oppression, the culture was shifting towards differentiation and integration. The rearrangement of the formal furnishing of the lecture room provided a powerful symbol of the overthrow of old cultural norms. The collaborative activity, laughter and emotional release which accompanied the change spoke louder than words, locking the transformation into shared group history.

The application of Kurt Lewin's force-field analysis (Lewin, K., 1951) to the development of double-loop learning gave a creative opportunity for the team to explore different learning modes in practice. The team was invited to monitor what happened to levels of energy, attention and information assimilation as the exercise progressed. First came a verbal presentation of the theory with minimal hand movements. It was entitled **Force-field Analysis and the Release of Constraints**, and went something as follows:

> **The dynamic equilibrium of double-loop learning at any given time in the life of an organisation can be seen as the result of the interplay of those forces driving the development in a positive direction and other constraints resisting it. Positive take-up of second order learning tends to activate an increase in the constraint system so aborting the development and returning the organisation to its original condition of dynamic equilibrium. Significant long-term change in the desired direction cannot be achieved by interventions that are limited to the positive force-field. It is essential to identify the constraint system and intervene to release it. It is also vital to analyse the feed-back loops which link positive development with increase in resistance and to uncouple these mechanisms of dynamic conservatism within the learning system**.

It was fascinating to watch the rapt attention of a few contrasted with the wide yawns of others. Four consultants gazed out of the window or doodled on their note-pads with bored expressions on their faces. There were three aggressive interruptions asking for clarification, criticising a particular point or proclaiming

that the material was “old hat” and not worth repeating. The culture changed from active inter-dependency to passive dependency shot through with aggressive counter-dependency. We were then able to identify the responses with the preferred learning styles of the people concerned.

Next, the same material was presented in visual form with an animated overhead projection cell constructed with cardboard, pins, rubber-bands and string. The combination of visual and verbal modes held the focused attention of all but the action-learners in the group.

Finally we moved out of the lecture room into the foyer of the training centre. A circle of rope some six feet in diameter was provided and each consultant invited to grasp it firmly. The instruction was for each person to try and move the rope ring towards them while making sure it did not move towards anyone else! There was a multi-directional tug-of-war and the circle locked solid in dynamic equilibrium. Stepping into the centre of the circle I announced myself as their new manger and indicated the direction of development in which I planned to take the organisation. Taking hold of the rope I started to push with all my strength. The circle moved a few centimetres, then went into reverse and returned to its original position. There were roars of laughter as consultants recognised, some with wry smiles and painful memories, similar reactions to directive and authoritarian attempts to introduce organisational change in client systems.

Conference centre staff began to get caught up in the psychodrama, so one of them was invited to join me in the centre of the ring. We obviously needed stronger management. Having agreed our strategic direction we both lunged at the rope in concert only to find the dynamic conservatism was overwhelming. The ring was immovable! The assistant manager was fired on the spot for gross incompetence. Two new outsiders were brought in to act as team-building consultants. Most of their interventions had no effect whatsoever, some served to polarise the ring as anti-consultant dynamics built up in opposition. Eventually they too were fired and the organisation faced its despair of ever being able to cope with change.

At this point I left the centre of the ring and came round behind the consultants who were pulling against the direction of development. They represented the constraints in the force-field. Changing the ground-rules of the exercise I encouraged them to ease up and relax the tension on the rope while still urging those on the far side of the ring to keep pulling. The whole system began to move smoothly in the positive developmental direction. It accelerated towards

the end of the foyer accompanied by the cheers and applause of the by now not inconsiderable group of intrigued onlookers.

Stimulated by the strenuous physical exercise and bubbling over with insights, comments and applications, team members grouped together in working threes. They were invited to review the process of learning, comparing the effectiveness of the action-based mode with that of the preceding visual and verbal presentations. Then they moved on to reflect on the content communicated and discovered as the modified force-field analysis was applied to the change from single-loop to double-loop learning. The rope-ring exercise offered a powerful mirror not only to their own experience in the workshop, but also to the dynamics frequently encountered in their engagements with client organisations.

The triads were self-selecting on the grounds of least familiar relationship, greatest diversity and differences in preferred learning style. Their final task was to identify and analyse the constraints and resistance to double-loop learning whether personally as individuals, or corporately in the team as a whole. Using their own and each-other's resources and experience they began searching for reasons why it was so hard to unlearn familiar patterns of learning and to learn to learn in new ways. Time passed almost unconsciously as the exploration went deeper and deeper. Almost without noticing they had begun to build a more effective learning community with high levels of differentiation, though as yet the integrative processes had not started to emerge.

INTER ALIA II

While the consultant team is busy, it might be worth looking back to ***Inter Alia I*** *to review whether reading about more effective ways of reading made any difference to the way you read the rest of this chapter. If changes did result, are they still in operation, steadily improving, or have you returned to the familiar skills you were using at the beginning? How well does the "rope-ring simulator" apply to the dynamics of re-learning to read? Can you identify the constraints which tend to return behaviour to old patterns, and, even more importantly, can you find ways of releasing them, so liberating movement into effective second order learning? If there has been no significant change and you are concerned to enable your own consultant organisation to develop into a more advanced learning system, why are you still reading this chapter! What more effective strategies of learning can you devise in order to achieve your goal?*

INTERLUDE II: ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Some characteristic marks of an advanced learning system are already beginning to emerge from the case study, while others need to be introduced. For the sake of theoretical clarity these characteristics, or 'elements of design', can be separated into two fields. The first addresses the set of cultural norms or values which provide an essential milieu if advanced learning is to take root and thrive. The second focuses on the necessary structures and processes involved. Here the learning functions and the organisational framework which supports them begin to take shape.

CULTURAL NORMS AND VALUES OF THE ADVANCED LEARNING SYSTEM

Effective second order learning needs a culture which:

- Sees information, skills and experience of others as a resource for learning rather than as a threat to status.
- Values diversity rather than imposing uniformity.
- Recognises the existence of different learning styles
- Aims to develop holistic learning, both individually and corporately
- Welcomes the discovery of incompetence as the starting-point of learning
- Encourages creativity, innovation and risk taking
- Values the identification and release of constraints above the reinforcement of positive drives.
- Harnesses the power of co-operative learning in community in place of the isolation of individualistic competition.
- Operates with a high degree of differentiation and integration in the team structure.
- Honours fast-track learning above high performance as a quality of leadership
- Focuses attention on improving the learning process at every level

A value set of this nature defines the field parameters which enable delineation and selection of optimal structural elements within the design of an advanced learning system. The detailed structures and protocols for optimum learning performance of any given consultant organisation will depend on the precise circumstances of that specific system. They will also evolve over time as the circumstances change and as the order of learning system matures. Certain general principles, modified by the situation-specific variables, can be described as follows:

STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS OF AN ADVANCED LEARNING SYSTEM

- High levels of participation independent of the number of consultants in the organisation require the multiplication of parallel-processing micro-teams as an essential element of design.

- Development of high levels of trust, essential for fostering risk-taking and creativity, sharing and vulnerability, appears to be optimal in groups of three.

- Balanced interdependence within the working triads is enhanced by role-exchange and the skills of co-consultancy.

- Holistic learning harnesses all four dimensions of communication in each micro-team. Spoken and written modes will be accompanied by the use of imaging, art forms and symbolisation. Acting out, psychodrama, role-play and attention to body-language both inner and outer will be encouraged. Feelings and emotional reactions, so often repressed in formal education and training, will be welcomed and supported within certain agreed boundaries of safety.

- Co-operative exploration and utilisation of all resources for learning will be distributed across the team membership, with the learning inputs shared with the whole team as and when appropriate.

- Incorporation of new members and the strengthening of the weakest relationships within the consultant team can be achieved by the dissolution and reconstitution of the micro-teams on a regular basis.

- Inter-triadic integration can be served by the meeting of representatives. It is even more effectively generated by some variation of a matrix design. The complexity and number of dimensions of the matrix will depend on the size of

the consultant organisation. The aim is to establish an optimum set of feedback-loops between all elements of the matrix.

- Structural design features are necessary but not sufficient. The learning processes also depend on the quality of feedback attainable within the system. Defensive and repressive filtering of critical signals will abort significant learning just as much as offensive use of criticism as ammunition in an inter-personal or inter-departmental war.

- As the learning system matures attention will increasingly be paid to the covert and unconscious dynamics of the organisation which constitute some of the most powerful constraints on the evolution of advanced learning systems.

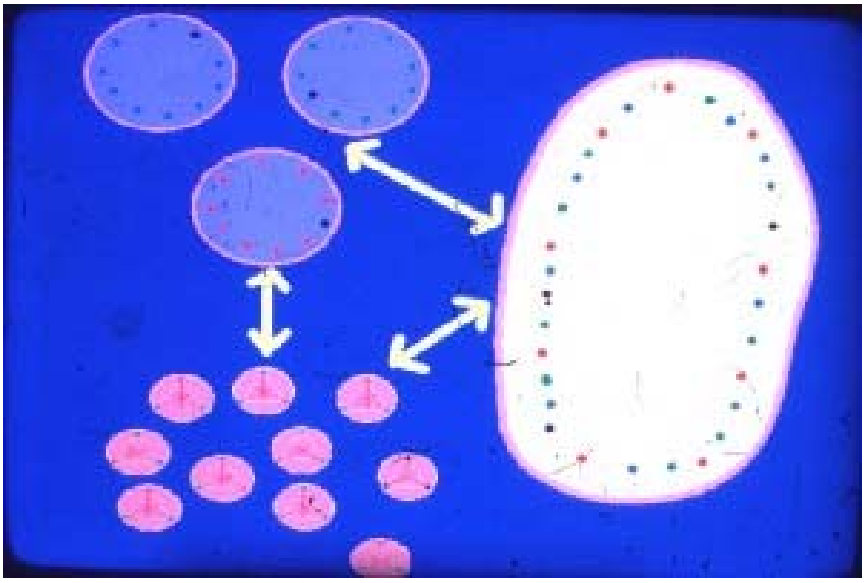
- Leadership of an advanced learning system calls for skills and procedures that are significantly different from those employed in the management of the operational level of the team. Competence requires that leaders not only "walk the talk" by being fast-track learners open to second and higher order learning in their own life and work, but also have skill in monitoring the learning system of the organisation and ability to facilitate the evolution of the system and to catalyse the learning processes within it (Hitt, W.D., 1995).

Structures, functions and procedures are necessary but not sufficient parameters. Without the appropriate cultural norms and shared values, learning will be significantly inhibited. Conversely, no matter how benign and supportive the culture, learning will not take place at an optimal level unless it has a skeletal framework or structure and a clear, though evolving, set of functional procedures or protocols. The evolution of an advanced learning system requires the creative and complementary interplay of culture and structure, values and procedures, all of which must be open to examination, assessment and creative transformation.

Holding that theoretical framework in mind we can now return to the workshop to see how some of the principles began to emerge in practice.

EVOLVING THE MATRIX DESIGN

Nine parallel-processing triads had been at work seeking to identify and analyse the constraints and resistance to double-loop learning, whether personal or organisational. The first step towards integration of the material was to ask each member of the working triads to meet up with one member from each of the other micro-teams, so creating three parallel-processing small groups of nine members. Each group afforded an opportunity to work not only on the inter-personal dynamics of its members, but also on the integration of the inter-triad dynamics of the whole team. As each member shared the most significant learning of their micro-team, so the similarities and differences began to surface. Creative insight emerging from one individual in one triad became available to every member of the organisation. Problems identified by one triad could now be addressed by all. Every member began to be able to grasp the contribution of the team as a whole.



Returning to their basic triads, members were able to pool insights from all three small groups, representing the total input from the complete set of parallel - processing micro-teams. The triads were no longer comparat-ively isolated units but found them-selves to be handling the inter-group dynamics of the whole organisation in parallel with each of the other threes. With the feed-back loops firmly in place (Figure 6) the learning began to deepen and accelerate (Wasdell, D., 1992). The information and creativity of all was available to each. Processing was however still being damped by the filtering and defences of individuals and of the sub-groups in which they took part. The quality of the feed-back loops was being experienced as a limiting factor in the learning of the matrix.

CONSTRAINTS IDENTIFIED

Next the whole team gathered to share its findings and to review its process. One director identified the way he felt that admitting ignorance or a need to

learn new skills was a threat to his status and undermined his authority in the organisation. His insecurity had not only inhibited his own learning but set a role-model for others and blocked the capacity of the organisation as a whole to gain new competencies. One or two younger members shared how their sense of dependency had made them devalue their own contribution and treat the senior consultants as almost omniscient, so colluding with the director's defences. One in particular, fresh from a doctoral programme at a leading consultancy-training institute, had been withholding leading edge information from the team because she was aware of her comparative lack of hands-on experience in a client context.

A natural left-hander recalled how parents and teachers had forced the adoption of right-handed behaviour, leading to a whole range of learning difficulties. That opened the floodgates for the identification of experiences in school and college which had encouraged learning patterns now identified as handicaps in the field of holistic learning. One dominant concern was the over-emphasis on the skills of verbal, linear, analytic communication together with the under-rating, indeed in some cases positive repression, of intuition, imagination, visualisation and multi-dimensional creativity. The splitting of cognitive functions into two fields with one set idealised and the other denigrated had set up impoverished norms for learning and communication within the organisation. It had also had the effect of down-grading the team's ability for problem solving, lateral thinking and creativity. The gender stereotyping of "masculine" and "feminine" functions had contributed to the conflicted projection into the roles of the male and female directors of the team.

With new learning seen as a threat, members had been discouraged from attending workshops and courses. Those who had still persevered had found that new skills or insights brought back to the team were not welcomed. The information technology specialist shared her frustration at the ignorance and resistance to learning of the team in this vital field. She was looking for ways of streamlining the administration and communication, and introducing systems simulation tools which could dramatically enhance the competencies of her colleagues.

The clinical psychologist revealed how a painfully forcepted birth had laid down behaviour patterns which had made him pull back from creative initiatives all through his life. The boundary between the known and the unknown raised acute anxiety leading him to take refuge in the known, so repeatedly aborting new learning.

The list of constraints continued. Some issues were quite facile, others brought a moment of awed silence as team members recognised the implications of what was being shared.

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

As the constraints were identified and owned, the culture began to change into a more open, learning-oriented stance. The exercise led naturally into a team brainstorm of resources and protocols for learning, which were listed and ordered as follows:

- Literature search, including new books, field journals, papers, articles and abstracts. Significant material could be circulated round the team and when appropriate, become the focus of a group seminar.

- Improving the information technology of the organisation including the provision of lap-top computers for consultants working at remote client venues. Keeping in touch via e-mail and the possibility of referral and team conferencing gave each member access to the expertise of others, rather than feeling isolated and limited to their own knowledge and experience.

- Monitoring of World-Wide Web sites on the Internet giving access to new research in the field of organisational learning and allied subjects (ENFOLD, 1996). Material could be fed into the IT system of the organisation and be used for reference or in the seminar programme.

- Attendance by members of the organisation at outside seminars, workshops, short courses and national and international conferences. This would not only alert the team to new developments in the field, but help to internalise advances in the competence and skill-base of consultancy. It was pointed out that special attention would have to be paid to the processes of sharing the information and applying the learning through the team.

- Release of some members for study leading to higher qualifications, particularly in courses with direct application to the specific consultancy focus of the team. It was also recognised that there would be spin off to the organisation's learning if some members were encouraged to write, lecture, run workshops or conduct consultancy-training events in addition to working with client organisations.

- Introduction of de-briefing groups and shadow-consulting as normal procedures. This would give each consultant resources to review and learn from engagements with the support and creative criticism of colleagues.

- Establishment of a culture in which it was expected that every member of the team would be engaged in a process of life-long learning in pursuit of best practice and professional excellence.

- Putting in place effective feed-back loops which would enable continuous improvement of the administrative in-house functions of the team.

- Use of professional supervision from outside the organisation with particular attention to the issues of personal psychodynamic development, and the raising of awareness of unconscious processes in the interpersonal relationships of the team and in the dynamics of the organisation as a whole.

- Holding occasional in-house dynamics workshops which would provide an opportunity not only to become more conscious of the group's own process, but also serve as a learning-lab in which to work on issues of transference and counter-transference between the team and its client organisations.

- Formalisation of a learning-support-and-review matrix structure for the whole organisation with built-in commitment to monitoring and improving its own learning-review procedures.

APPLICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Two weeks after the learning systems workshop, the group of consultants reconvened for half a day to put in hand the application of their experience. They used the matrix design of parallel-processing triads, small groups and plenary to generate an action programme, the aim of which was to ensure that the consultant organisation optimised its learning procedures including its ability to review and improve those procedures over time. They also decided to hold a second learning systems workshop in one year's time to review the implementation of the action plan, to identify the constraints which they had encountered during the year and to implement some elements of triple-loop learning. The goal was to learn ways of improving their procedures for learning to learn both as individuals and as a team.

One outcome was that the organisation as a whole began to operate as a reflexive learning lab, learning from its own experience of trying to implement advanced learning systems. Those lessons and the practical experience gained

were of great value in work with client systems, enabling the consultants to avoid mistakes and pitfalls which had already been encountered.

There we will have to take leave of the consultant team with whom we have travelled so far. Not that their process is complete or all the lessons learned, far from it. In a sense they have only just begun to open the door on the potential of advanced learning systems for the life of a consultant organisation. If the experience from other situations is anything to go by, their long-term success will depend on their ability to come to terms with the psychodynamics of transformation and integration - but that is another subject in its own right.

IN CONCLUSION

Let us pause for a moment to review the progress of the consulting organisation. On our first encounter we met a group of highly competent individual performers whose relationships were locked in defensive conflict and whose learning was at a low ebb. As a team they were unconscious of their dynamics and unaware of the blocked and limited nature of their learning procedures. We have followed them through a learning system audit, an identification of different learning styles and an uncomfortable exposure of some of the dysfunctional inter-personal dynamics at work. Slowly the organisation developed a new structure of parallel-processing triads, explored new learning styles in practice and began to identify and release the constraints which blocked its capacity to learn new ways of learning. Integration of micro-teams began with a double circle of representatives before evolving into an interactive matrix, its learning supported and accelerated through a network of feedback loops.

Between the lines, we struggled with the limitation of learning from the printed word, while theoretical interludes introduced an analysis of different orders of learning system from the most simple to the more advanced. They also summarised some of the needed values, norms, structures and procedures required for the development of the consulting organisation as an advanced learning system. We watched the team brainstorm of resources for learning and wondered how far they would be able to go in implementation of their new learning in the coming months and years. At the end we faced the worrying possibility that as yet unconscious constraints and defences would emerge with power to block and reverse the progress made. How would the new challenges be met? Could the emergent constraints continue to be identified and released or would the organisation succumb in collusion, leaving further advance to other more open teams who would eventually take their place in a changing world?

For myself, I am left reviewing my own role as a catalyst to the organisation's attempt to move from single-loop to double-loop learning and beyond. I know there are better ways of doing it, and I will never go about it in the same way again! But then, that's learning….(Wasdell, D., 1996)

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

While no attempt is made to provide a comprehensive bibliography, the following notes and references will enable readers to explore the field in whatever depth is required.

Bion, W.R., 1961, 'Experiences in Groups', Tavistock Publications. Although dated, this classical analysis of unconscious emotional assumptions in group behaviour is still relevant.

ENFOLD, 1996. The newly established European Network for Organisational Learning Development, is already active on the Internet with its own established website, http://www.orglearn.nl

Hitt, W.D., 1995, 'The Learning Organization: Some Reflections on Organizational Renewal', Leadership and Organizational Development Journal, Vol.16, No.8, pp.17-25. This short paper addresses some of the issues of leadership in advanced learning systems.

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Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J., Boydell, T., 1991, 'The Learning Company', McGraw-Hill. Affords a basic introduction to the development of Organisational Learning in a variety of client systems.

Rose, C., 1985, 'Accelerated Learning', Accelerated Learning Systems Ltd. Popular overview with excellent research bibliography. Pp.152 ff. introduce the field of preferred learning styles. Up to date access to field literature, training workshops etc. in the area of accelerated learning and reading skills can be obtained from SEAL (Society for Effective Affective Learning) c/o 49 Henley Road, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP1 3SJ

Senge, P., 1992, 'The Fifth Discipline', Century Business. Essential reading for this whole field. In particular he offers some penetrating insight into the dysfunctional effects of formal education.

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Wasdell, D., 1992, 'Meridian Matrix, Experiential Learning for Tomorrow's World', Meridian Programme, offers a more detailed description of the application of matrix structures to the task of consultancy training.

Wasdell, D., 1993, 'Learning Systems and the Management of Change', International Organisation Development Association Journal, Vol.1., No.1, pp. 47-73, gives a more detailed exposition with a wider range of case material.

Wasdell, D., 1996. As part of my commitment to the learning process, I would welcome any comments, reflections or suggestions from readers of this chapter. Please contact me at: Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE,