Learning and Organisational IQ

Despite pervasive rhetoric about learning organisations I have found it hard to find one. It has always been hard to find real examples. For the last decade or more, organisation after organisation has declared that they must become a learning organisation and have incorporated ‘learning organisation’ into some part of the corporate vision, promoting activities and concepts such as life long learning, individual learning, team training, leadership development, and learning environments, but experience little or no real change. The learning organisation vision is used to rationalise e-learning systems, LMS, LMCS and all the other paraphernalia that goes along with that. Even though Peter Senge (The Fifth Discipline) says there is more than just training – particularly vision and systems thinking – focussing on training seems to suffice for some. Some critics of Senge’s model hold that the model does seem to favour individual and collective learning processes, but does not connect them properly to strategic objectives, and training becomes the low hanging fruit. The link between individual and collective learning and the organization’s strategic objectives is essential.

It is not that individual and team mastery is not important; it is necessary, but not sufficient for organisational learning, or organisational performance. As Geary Rummler observed some forty years ago “Put a good performer in a bad system and the system will win every time”. If that’s the case, then we do need to address the system. Which leads me to Rummler’s ideas of organisational IQ since it seems to me that the reason an organisation would take on the task of learning is to increase the organisational IQ.

Rummler defines an organisation’s intelligence (IQ) as the organisation’s ability to effectively adapt to a changing environment. What he means by this is the ability to anticipate or detect changes in the environment and influence those changes and/or change the system to be able to ‘profit’ from those changes and the ability to anticipate or detect performance gaps in operations and to take corrective or preventative action.

Premises to this definition are that results are about adapting to continuously changing targets and circumstances, how well an organisation adapts is a function of organisational intelligence, and therefore, results are going to be a function of organisational intelligence or IQ.

According to Rummler, organisation IQ has only two components: the “intelligence” infrastructure (i.e. the feedback mechanisms) and the leadership – the individuals who act or don’t act on the data available. Leadership has to know what results are expected, know what variables will determine those results, know how well the organisation is performing against the expected results, finally know what has to be done to achieve the results. Then, leadership has to act.

In late June, MS&T attended the “Stability Campaigns: Do We Learn?” conference. Sponsored by the Canadian Army’s Land Force Doctrine and Training System and the Queen’s University Centre for International Relations, the conference was directed at senior personnel and included military, government, media, and academic participants. According to the organisers, the conference was about “learning to learn” about and from stability campaigns at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

Well the conference presenters had some interesting views: organisations forget, but sometimes forgetting has to be managed; strategically we’re learning as well as we might; operationally we’re doing pretty well; and at the tactical level lessons learned are coming fast and furious, but we need to react more quickly; and focus on results at all levels. Army leadership outlined the need for feedback at all levels – tactical, operational and strategic. Leadership must be engaged and kept engaged, and leaders developed. Metrics are required, and decision making based on effects. One take away that resonated with me was “a lesson is not a lesson learned until there is a change”.

The other take away was that I believe I found a learning organisation, with a high IQ. The fact of the conference itself, the leadership, the participation, and the content of the presentations are sufficient evidence of that. And so are the results we are seeing in far away places. That is reassuring for both the present and the future.

Jeff Loube
Managing Editor
jeff@hallidale.com