

Is yours a learning organization?

By David A. Garvin, Amy C Edmondson and Francesca Gino, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2008

Three broad requirements are essential for organizational learning:

- Supportive learning environment
- Concrete learning processes and practices
- Leadership that reinforces learning

Supportive learning environment: An environment that supports learning has four distinguishing features:

Psychological safety: People should not be afraid of asking questions, expressing their opinions freely or admitting their mistakes.

Appreciation of differences: Learning occurs when people become aware of opposing ideas.

Openness to new ideas: Employees should be encouraged to take risks and explore the unknown.

Time for reflection: If people are too busy and overstressed by deadlines, they will not be able to pause and think about how to improve the way they are working.

Concrete learning processes and practices: These include:

Experimentation: Developing and testing new products and services

Information collection: About competitors, customers, economic, social and technological trends

Analysis: to identify and solve problems

Education and training: To develop employees

Leadership that reinforces learning

When leaders actively question and listen to employees and encourage dialogue and debate, learning flourishes. When leaders signal the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer and reflective post audits, people will be encouraged to learn. When leaders demonstrate their willingness to entertain alternative points of view, learning will again flourish.

Concluding notes

The three building blocks reinforce one another and to some extent overlap each other. Thus, leadership behaviours create a supportive learning environment which in turn makes it easier to execute concrete learning processes, which in turn enable leaders to display the most appropriate behaviours.

Leadership alone is not enough. Formal learning processes are also needed. Different parts of the organization may have to be handled differently. What is important is not absolute performance but performance relative to competitors. Leaders must also appreciate that learning is multi-dimensional and choose a combination of levers rather than just one lever.