

# CREATING LEARNING ORGANISATIONS IN THE MALAYSIAN CIVIL SERVICE

Dr. Tam Weng Wah

## ABSTRACT

*In this environment of rapid technological advancement and intense global competition, organisations need to learn quickly if they are to survive and create value. Government agencies are no exceptions; if they cannot learn as quickly as the changes in the environment, they become irrelevant to the stakeholders and the people. This paper examines some issues involved in transforming government agencies into learning organisations. It begins by providing a brief description regarding the meaning of a learning organisation. It then highlights the key characteristics of an effective learning organisation as well as the stages involved in organisational learning. Applying the framework developed by MIT Organisational Learning Center, section three discusses the key factors involved in building a learning organisation and relates these factors to the efforts taken by the Public Service Department of Malaysia (PSD) to ensure that it continues to be relevant and create value in an environment of rapid and unprecedented change. The final section provides guidelines as to the changes in key organisational components that are required to sustain the transformational change process and highlights the contributions of the PSD in helping to transform government agencies into learning organisations.*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent events seem to support the contention that as we move further into this new millennium, the more complex and uncertain the future seems to be. The September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the collapse of huge conglomerates such as Enron, Arthur Anderson and WorldCom in the United States, the invasion of Iraq and the fall of the Saddam regime, and the emergence and rapid spread of the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in several parts of the world, provide compelling evidence that unprecedented change is the only constant in the future. Under such situations of extreme complexity and uncertainty, organisations that hope to survive and thrive in the future are those that can learn as quickly as, if not more quickly than the rapidly changing environment. Organisations that fail to learn will become irrelevant and will not continue to exist for long. Government agencies are no exceptions, if they fail to learn, they too will become irrelevant, they will see resources drying up, a bleak future for their people and also new organisations or entities being created to take over their tasks. Furthermore, the negative impact of government agencies that fail to learn is also more extensive because these failures have widespread effects on businesses, people as well as the national economy and the

nation. Therefore, it is even more crucial for government agencies to keep pace with the change by enhancing their learning capabilities.

*“Modern organisations seem to have little choice but to adapt to the relentless pace of change or face the risk of extinction. There is indeed a stark realization that the traditional bureaucratic approach is no longer suitable to support competitive position of a hyper-dynamic environment.”* (Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006)

## **DEFINING THE MEANING OF A LEARNING ORGANISATION**

Although many people have been using the term “learning organisation” to describe their organisation, one must be aware that it has different meanings for different people. Similarly, even though there is a proliferation of writings on the subject of learning organisation, there is still no consensus as to one universally accepted definition (Thomas & Allen, 2006; Yeo, 2005). Examples of the various definitions are as follows:

“Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together” (Senge, 1990);

*“...an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself”* (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991);

*“An organisation that creates an environment where the behaviors and practices involved in continuous development are actively encouraged.”* (Mumford, 1995);

*“A learning organisation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge, and at purposefully modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.”* (Garvin, 2000).

Given these diverse definitions, therefore it is appropriate to begin by defining the meaning of “learning organisation” that is being used in this article. For our purpose in this article, it is suffice to define a learning organisation “as an organisation that facilitates the acquisition and sharing of knowledge and enables its people to transform

the acquired knowledge into wisdom which results in value creation contributions for the organisation, its people and the community it serves.” This definition does not focus on the structure or the process aspects of the organisation, but on the outcome and impact aspects of organisational learning; i.e. the mission of the organisation in relation to its internal and external stakeholders (employees, shareholders, and the local community). The emphasis of this definition is on the application of acquired knowledge for the benefit of the organisation, its employees and its environment. In short, it focuses on the value creation aspect of organisational learning at all levels, namely individual, organisational and community. Very often, the emphasis is on learning that results in better organisational performance but ignoring the impact on the local community. For example, learning that emphasises on short-term profits may lead to pollution and destruction of the local environment, which in the long-run, jeopardises the sustainability of the environment for the organisation. Likewise, the continued emphasis of local companies on using cheap foreign labor in their production process may reduce the employment opportunities for the people in the local community.

#### **KEY FEATURES OF LEARNING ORGANISATIONS**

While the preceding section examines the definition of a learning organisation, this section highlights some of its key features. It focuses on the question of how will we know whether our organisation is a learning organisation. Garvin (2000) highlights several key questions that could be used to determine the extent to which an organisation is a learning organisation. These questions revolve around the following aspects: knowledge agenda, openness to discordant information, avoidance of mistakes, knowledge attrition, and transformation of behavior.

#### **What to Learn?**

A learning organisation needs to know what future knowledge is needed for it to survive and add value, particularly with regards to its customers, its stakeholders, as well as its competitors. Therefore to be a learning organisation, the organisation must be able to define what future knowledge the organisation needs to acquire for it to continue being relevant. Without knowing what future knowledge is required, the organisation will not be able to prepare itself adequately to deal with the emerging demands and challenges. Knowing what future knowledge required is not enough, it also needs to be clear on how and when it is going to acquire it, i.e. training, attachment, coaching, mentoring, experiments, visits, research or specialised assignments. Acquiring the knowledge is only part of the equation, the other aspect is how to share or disseminate the knowledge among its members, its stakeholders and its suppliers. It is useless if the acquired knowledge remains

unutilised in the individual, the library and the so called “knowledge bank or repository.” It is the utilisation of the shared knowledge to create value-added products or services that distinguishes between a traditional organisation from a learning organisation.

### **Continuously Challenging Assumptions**

A learning organisation needs to constantly reexamine its assumptions about itself and its environment to ensure that these assumptions are still valid. Just before the Asian financial crisis hit Malaysia, we had the assumption that if our economic fundamentals were sound, we would not be affected by the crisis that happened to our neighbors. On hindsight, we now know that this assumption was flawed. In this respect, the learning organisation also needs to be ready to accept the possibility that some of its basic assumptions may no longer be valid. In short, the learning organisation must be open to “negative feedback” and avoid creating a “killing the messenger” syndrome. If organisations are unwilling to accept “negative feedback” and unwilling to question the status quo or challenge existing assumptions, even though the evidence reflects otherwise, “bad news” will tend to be camouflaged, watered down and regarded as being insignificant. As a result, the information that reaches the top may not reflect the true situation on the ground and decisions will be made based on flawed information. Senior executives become out of touch with reality, thus limiting their ability to make more informed decisions. To minimize the possibility of such incidents occurring, it is therefore important for organisational leaders to adopt the “management by walking about” approach and to encourage people to provide sincere feedback without fear of being punished as well as actively seeking feedback from customers and stakeholders.

### **Learning from Mistakes**

Another important key feature of a learning organisation is its ability to reflect on its past experiences and extract useful lessons that could be shared among its members to ensure mistakes are not repeated. In short, a learning organisation will try to capitalise on “productive failures” and to minimize “unproductive success.” Productive failures are those that enhance insights and understanding about why a particular failure happened. The learning results in a change in behavior, which in turn leads to improved performance, in terms of better customer satisfaction, higher profits, and more committed employees. Unproductive successes are those that people do not understand why or how the successes occur. Therefore, a learning organisation requires tolerance of error and a willingness to view failures as a necessary by-product of experimentation and risk taking. However, it is easier said than done. Even highly developed organisations such as NASA sometimes also

fail to learn. Initial investigations after the space shuttle "Columbia" disaster indicate that there was a high possibility that a dislodged two-pound protective foam might be the source that initiated a chain reaction resulting in the disintegration of the space craft. It was also revealed that NASA engineers were aware of the problem, but did not think it was significant enough to cause too much concern. Anyway, there were many previous such incidents before and they did not cause too much damage, until now. Similarly, the same pattern of thought also resulted in the "O-rings" problem being ignored as too insignificant to cause any concern in launching the "Challenger" in 1986. As a result, the "Challenger" exploded shortly after lift-off, killing all its seven crew members. Why didn't the NASA engineers learn from the experience of the "Challenger" whereby seemingly insignificant problems can result in a major disaster to prevent the "Columbia" tragedy? Maybe, it was not a case of failure to learn but because the structures or systems encourage the continuation of existing behaviors. For example, in organisations people will learn not to be too "smart" if they know that whoever comes up with a good idea will end up doing the job himself or herself.

### **Retaining Knowledge**

One common problem faced by most organisations is that when key personnel leave the organisation, critical knowledge is lost. There is no mechanism to ensure that tacit knowledge is codified and retained in the organisational memory to be shared with other members of the organisation. In a learning organisation, when key people leave, the knowledge is not lost. It is captured within the organisational memory (codified in policies or procedures, retained in reports or memos, disseminated to a large group of people, succession plan program) that could be extracted and shared among its members. In other words, there is no necessity to "reinvent the wheel" each time a key member leaves the organisation.

### **From Knowledge to Wisdom to Value Creation**

This final aspect concerns the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Information that helps us understand why a problem arises is knowledge. Wisdom occurs when we use the understanding to prevent similar problems from occurring in the future. In a learning organisation, application of what is learned is more important than mere retention. Therefore, the focus here is on what we do with the acquired knowledge. Just like in education, we do not send our children to school just to learn how to answer examination questions. We send them to school to learn and to be educated so that they can apply the acquired knowledge and be useful members of society. A learning organisation does not only capture and share

the knowledge, but also creates new meaning which will result in a change in behavior that enhances the value of the organisation and benefits its customers, stakeholders and the local community. What is the point if the knowledge is captured but not utilised? In short, organisations that are aware of their potential in enhancing value creation but do nothing about it as well as those organisations that are excellent in a specific areas but do not share it with their members are not learning organisations.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE LEARNING PROCESS**

Although there are many theories on the learning process in organisations, it can be simplified to three basic stages, namely (a) information acquisition, (b) information dissemination, and (c) information utilization. Before learning can occur, the organisation must acquire information and make sense (meanings, insights, threats, or opportunities) out of these varieties of signals, which more often than not, may be very conflicting in nature. Furthermore, the quality of the information depends very much on the type, source, as well as the means and medium through which the information is collected. In fact, the current challenge for most organisations is not the lack of information, but more of information overload. Therefore organisations must be able to separate the "signals" (relevant information) from the "noise" (irrelevant information). Sometimes there is a danger that "signals" are ignored and "noise" is given undue emphasis because of the selective nature of organisational managers. The next stage is the knowledge sharing stage, whereby the acquired knowledge and skills, as well as the lessons learned and relationships developed are shared or disseminated throughout the organisation. This act of sharing enables the acquired knowledge, skills, relationships, as well as the lessons learned to be institutionalized within the organisation. And finally at the knowledge utilisation stage, the people in the organisation make use of the shared knowledge to create new ideas, products or services, which enhances the effectiveness and relevance of the organisation within its environment.

## **KEY FACTORS IN BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL LEARNING ORGANISATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE DEPARTMENT, MALAYSIA.**

Developing a learning organisation is more than sending staff for training, seminar or conferences. It requires a major commitment of resources in terms of time, energy, money and material. This may also mean changing the social, financial, decision-making, and political structures of the organisation. Communication needs to be refocused, improved and enhanced. It also involves some risk taking and experimenting with alternative approaches in service delivery. Resources also need to be prioritized and invested towards developing a learning organisation. A culture

that nurtures a learning community needs to be developed and leadership roles need to be redefined. This section focuses on several key elements that need serious attention if an organisation wants to develop itself into a highly effective learning organisation.

In discussing the key factors that are required to develop a learning organisation, this paper adopts the framework proposed by the MIT Organisational Learning Center (Nevis, DiBella, and Gould, 1995) and applies it to determine the extent to which the Public Service Department (PSD) is able to transform itself into a learning organisation. According to this model, two major components need to be examined in order to determine the extent an organisation is moving towards becoming a learning organisation, namely (a) the learning orientation, and (b) the facilitation factors. Learning orientations or learning styles are the values and practices that reflect where learning takes place, while facilitating factors are the structures and processes that affect the extent to which effective learning is taking place.

### **Learning Orientations**

By examining the learning orientations, we are able to determine what is being learned and where it occurs. However, it will not tell us how well learning is taking place. The following section discusses the implications of learning orientations in relation to the PSD as it attempts to transform itself into a learning organisation.

### **Internal versus External Knowledge Source**

This aspect of learning orientation focuses on the preferred knowledge source of the organisation, i.e. to what extent does the organisation develop new knowledge internally or seeks inspiration in external ideas. Some organisations prefer to emphasise on the creation of knowledge from within itself (innovation), others prefer to acquire knowledge that is already available outside the organisation (adaptation). Organisations that prefer to create knowledge from within are innovators, whereas those organisations that prefer to seek knowledge from outside are imitators. Generally, the PSD attempts to balance between developing knowledge from within and looking to outside sources for its knowledge requirements. Activities linked to developing knowledge from within include "management-by-walking about", internal audit, project teams, brainstorming sessions, internal dialogues and discussions as well as special assignments and the experimental jamming sessions. Whereas activities linked to sourcing external knowledge include, training, benchmarking, study visits, attachments, partnerships and collaborations with external agencies, seminars, and conferences.

### **Service Centered versus Processes Centered**

This aspect of learning orientation focuses on the preferred area for knowledge building in the organisation. Does the organisation prefer to accumulate knowledge about its products and services (outcomes) or about the basic processes underlying various products and services? Some organisations prefer to be more process focused while others prefer to focus on their outputs in terms of products or services. Process oriented learning focuses on "doing things right", i.e. emphasising on efficiency, while product or service oriented learning focuses on "doing the right thing", i.e. emphasising effectiveness. However, nowadays there is a growing awareness that acquiring knowledge in both areas are of equal importance. Likewise, the PSD also emphasises both aspects, i.e. the products and services as well as the processes involved. In terms of services, the PSD constantly reviews the services it provides to ensure that they meet the changing needs of the current and future clients. The implementation of the Malaysian Remuneration System, Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS) and the contributory pension scheme are examples of efforts undertaken by the PSD to enhance its value creation. In terms of processes, the PSD also regularly reviews the processes involved in service delivery to ensure they are still relevant and efficient. Furthermore, the PSD also implemented the MS ISO 9000:2000 not only to ensure consistency in terms of quality standards of its services, but also to ensure that the processes are reviewed regularly for continuous improvement. In addition, all PSD personnel are required to attend a minimum of 7 days of training each year to ensure continuous learning in both areas to support knowledge build-up in the area of products and services development as well as process re-design.

### **Formal versus Informal Knowledge Documentation Mode**

This aspect of learning orientation focuses on whether learning is formally documented or remains an individual effort. On one end of the continuum, knowledge is seen in personal terms, as something the individual possesses by virtue of education or experience. Since this kind of knowledge is not shared and retained in the organisational memory, it is lost when the employee leaves the organisation. At the other end of the continuum, knowledge is defined as being a consensually supported result of information processing. This attitude emphasises the need for knowledge to be retained in the organisational memory or in publicly documented body of knowledge such as policy statements and procedure manuals. As for the PSD, in line with the MS ISO 9000:2000 requirements, its core policies and procedures are clearly documented and widely disseminated. Likewise, there are also manual procedures and desk files for each and every member of the organisation. In the

past, knowledge used to reside in the individual, and when the individual left or retired, the tacit knowledge was lost. However, with the establishment of PRISMA, a knowledge management system, the PSD is moving towards transferring individual knowledge to the organisational memory. However, this system is still in the preliminary stage where its usage is still limited. More efforts are needed to encourage its usage and enhance its potential.

### **Formal versus Informal Knowledge Dissemination Mode**

Learning can take place through formal or informal mode. In the formal mode, learning is structured and more controlled. There are formal procedures as to how acquired knowledge is to be disseminated. For instance, a person who returns from a training course is required to submit a copy of the material to be kept in the library or to share his or her experience in a formal presentation. Conversely, in the informal mode, learning is unstructured and its occurrence is by chance encounter, informal conversation and among limited groups. In such instances, there is no formal requirement for the person to share his or her newly acquired knowledge with other members of the organisation upon returning from a training program. It is up to the individual to decide with whom he or she would like to share the knowledge with. In such a situation, usually the transmitting of knowledge happens only during chance encounter or through informal conversation and not by design. Currently, the knowledge dissemination mode for the PSD is largely informal. Nevertheless, those who have attended training abroad are required to submit a report to the Human Resource and Management Services Division. Furthermore, at INTAN, which is a division under the PSD, there is also a requirement that the immediate supervisor has to evaluate the effectiveness of training courses attended by the subordinates. With the establishment of PRISMA, the PSD is slowly moving away from informal to more formal dissemination mode in terms of knowledge sharing. More and more information will be documented and made available "online" or "at the touch of the finger tip".

### **Adaptive versus Generative Learning**

Learning focus is a very crucial aspect in organisational learning. It distinguishes between single-loop (adaptive) learning and double-loop (generative) learning. In single-loop or adaptive learning, the existing assumptions are not questioned. The search for solution only focuses on correcting deviations from the norm and this tends to result in incremental change, i.e. doing things right. Whereas in double-loop (generative) learning, the focus is on questioning existing basic assumptions and re-examining these assumptions to determine whether they are still valid, i.e.

doing the right thing. Transformational change occurs when the long held assumptions are found to be no longer valid. In fact, Argyris and Schon (1978) have rightfully argued that organisational performance problems are more likely due to a lack of awareness and inability to articulate and check underlying assumptions than to a function of poor efficiency. If the underlying assumption is "Don't rock the boat", then there will be minimal risk-taking. However, if that basic assumption is changed to "It's alright to ask questions and provide alternative perspectives", then people will be more willing to "stick their necks out." Although the PSD focuses on adaptive learning, i.e. efficiency or doing things right, it is also expected to question some of its basic assumptions to ensure that it is also doing the right thing (effectiveness). As a result, the PSD is also moving towards a more proactive approach (generative learning) to enhance its service delivery through its "business not as usual" philosophy.

### **Design-Centered versus Delivery-Centered**

This aspect of learning orientation focuses on whether the organisation prefers to invest its learning resources (time, money, training, pilot projects, developmental assignments, etc.) in the "design or make" component or the "delivery and sell" component. Some organisations, particularly those in the high-tech industry such as the mobile telephone industry tend to focus their learning investments on the "design" component, while others such as those in the service industry tend to focus their learning investments on the "delivery" component. In the case of the PSD, equal emphasis is given to both the "design" and "delivery" components. The "design" component is important because the PSD needs to ensure that the services provided are relevant to the needs of the clients as well as the stakeholders. The "delivery" component is also important because the PSD needs to ensure that the process is efficient and cost-effective. Therefore PSD officers and staff are sent for training in both areas, i.e. to enhance their capability in service design and development as well as in service delivery. Although the PSD is a government agency with a "captured" market, it still needs to keep its stakeholders informed about the relevance of its programs and activities in relation to the needs of the country. It also has to do some "selling" by informing other agencies about its products and services through brochures, annual report and its website.

### **Individual Learning versus Team Learning**

The final aspect of learning orientation is focused on skill development, i.e. does the organisation prefer to develop individual skills or group skills? In their study on the failure of a local authority to create a learning organisation, Betts and Holden (2003) conclude that organisational learning should be collective and process-driven.

As with most organisations, the focus of skills development at the PSD is still on developing individual skills. Nevertheless, it is also moving towards team learning, where group-focused activities are being given more emphasis. These include group-based activities such as strategic planning sessions, family days, and inter-divisional sports events. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement in the area of team or collective learning. Since team learning is a very crucial aspect in building learning organisations, more team-based activities are being actively encouraged. Having more team-based activities is essential but not sufficient enough to guarantee the development of a learning organisation; there is also a need to enhance group skills that promote generative learning. Measures undertaken by the PSD to enhance diversity, creativity, critical thinking, effective listening and questioning skills among its employees are positive steps towards this direction.

## **GENERIC FACILITATING FACTORS**

As highlighted earlier, examining the learning orientation enables us to determine what is being learned and where learning takes place. But it will not be able to inform us about the effectiveness of the learning process. For learning to be effective, it needs to be supported by some policies, structures, and processes. According to Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1995), there are ten facilitating factors that support learning in an organisation, regardless of the learning style. The following sections examine each of these factors in relation to the PSD's journey towards becoming a learning organisation.

### **Environmental Scanning**

This facilitating factor focuses on the ability of the organisation to understand or comprehend the environment in which it operates. For an organisation to survive and thrive, it needs to learn as fast, if not faster, than the changes in the environment. In order to do so, it needs to know what is happening in the environment and be able to detect changing trends. To ensure its relevance, the organisation must be able to sense where the opportunities and the threats are and take appropriate actions to respond positively to these changes. The PSD is very well aware of the need to be sensitive to the changes in the environment and to respond appropriately. Sensing activities include visits to excellent organisations in the private or public sector, sending people for training or attachments, participation in national, regional and international programmes and activities, strategic planning sessions, obtaining inputs from its customers and stakeholders, using MS ISO 9001:2000 as the driver for continuous improvement, as well as collaborations with local and international organisations.

*“We often practise a reverse belief – that to maintain our identity, our individuality, we must protect ourselves from the demands of external forces. We tend to think that isolation and clear boundaries are the best way to maintain individuality. But in a world of self-organizing structures, we learn that useful boundaries develop through openness to the environment.”*

*Wheatley, Margaret. Leadership and the New Science, pp. 92-93.*

## **IDENTIFYING THE PERFORMANCE GAP**

Complacency is a great barrier to organisational learning. If we do not know where we are and where we should be, we tend to feel comfortable and do not see the need to change or to acquire new skills or knowledge. The second facilitating factor focuses on the extent to which the organisation is aware of the performance gap. The performance gap is important because it often leads the organisation to recognise that learning needs to occur. Things that have been working well suddenly seem to become problematic; implying that previously held assumptions may no longer be valid. The awareness of a performance gap, i.e. what should be achieved (targeted) as compared to what is actually achieved, could provide important information as to what kind of knowledge should be given priority. In this respect, the PSD has been providing opportunities for its members to examine and discuss the possible root causes whenever any performance gap occurs. Planned outcomes and actual achievements are discussed at regular intervals (half yearly) sessions and if there is any deviation, members are given the opportunity to share their perspectives and re-examine the basis or assumptions of earlier decisions. However, as with other government agencies, there is also a limitation as to the extent of control the PSD has over some of the decisions made by external stakeholders, which the PSD has to implement. In these situations, the PSD provides feedback to external stakeholders to serve as a basis to guide future decisions.

### **Measuring for Learning**

Related to the above facilitating factor, is the question on the usage of quantitative measurements, i.e. does the organisation develop and use measurements to support and reinforce learning? This aspect is important because the measurement serves as a guide as to the extent that the organisation is achieving its targeted learning goals. Learning goals can be external or internal focused, generic or custom-built. To support and reinforce its objective of becoming a learning organisation, the PSD explicitly specifies that all its employees must attain a minimum number of seven (7) training days each year. Failure to achieve this minimum requirements will

result in the person concerned being excluded as a candidate for the annual excellent service award and other incentives. The PSD monitors this aspect very closely and sends reminders to those members who have not attained the minimum seven (7) training days. Furthermore, in the middle of the year, the Director of Human Resources Management and Support Services will send a congratulatory note to those who have achieved the set targets and reminders to those who have yet to achieve the set targets.

### **Testing Conventional Wisdom**

This aspect of the facilitating factor focuses on the question, "Does the organisation emphasise experimentation on an ongoing basis?" In a learning organisation, opportunity must be provided for organisational members to experiment with alternative approaches in conducting the core business. This also provides opportunity for the organisation to test or re-examine its conventional wisdom (basic assumptions). In this respect, the PSD constantly reviews and experiments with new approaches of designing, implementing and evaluating its services. Examples of such efforts include the introduction of the contributory pension scheme, "jamming sessions" for ideas generation, online "chat" sessions with the clients to help resolve their problems, formulation of a more explicit exit policy, the introduction of Competency-Based Human Resource Management as well as lateral entry in recruiting talent to enhance service delivery. As a result, the PSD has moved from being a traditional risk-averse bureaucracy to a more vibrant and innovative entity.

### **Open Information Sharing**

Availability of relevant information is another important facilitating factor in building a learning organisation. Without clear information flow, people in the organisation will not understand why certain actions need to be taken, who should be responsible, as well as how and when those actions need to be taken. Furthermore, they need to be able to provide feedback as to the reason why something is not working well and to share their thoughts with others as to how those issues can be resolved quickly. Providing opportunities for interaction with other groups and seeing higher levels of management in operation can also promote learning. In an atmosphere of openness, people are also able to learn from mistakes or failures. As such, abnormalities or deviations are publicly reported throughout the entire system so that everyone is aware of it. Given the need to ensure confidentiality as well as the concern for sensitivity, it may not be possible for the PSD to be a totally open organisation. Nevertheless, when it comes to issues affecting the effectiveness of its core business, openness is actively encouraged.

## **Lifelong Learning**

In a learning organisation, learning is seen as a lifelong process and it does not end at the schools or the universities. Furthermore, learning is not just for those at the top management level but also for those at other levels. Therefore to build a learning organisation, another aspect that needs to be focused upon is whether there is a commitment to lifelong education at all levels of the organisation. This includes formal and less formal programmes that support any kind of developmental experience. In the case of the PSD as mentioned earlier, there is already a commitment by the top management that everyone must achieve a minimum of seven (7) training days per year and this is being closely monitored. Besides that, organisational members are also encouraged to participate in developmental activities including undertaking advisory assignments, doing research in specialised areas, presenting papers in seminars and conferences, chairing or facilitating special events, organising special events, and becoming members of special project teams.

## **Enhancing Adaptability through Operational Variety**

Operational variety implies that there is more than one approach to accomplish organisational goals. A learning organisation is an organisation that also supports and encourages variation in strategy, policy, process, structure, and personnel to ensure that it is more adaptable to unforeseen problems. As an organisation becomes more specialised, it will become more difficult for the organisation to adapt to new situations. Operational variety allows for more perspectives, more interpretations and more options to deal with an issue. Being a government agency, there is a limitation as to the extent to which operational variety could be implemented. There are government rules and procedures that need to be followed to ensure transparency and accountability. There are also the MS ISO 9000:2000 procedures that employees have to follow closely to ensure that the PSD retains its quality assurance certification. However, this does not mean that creativity or alternative perspectives are not encouraged in the organisation. For instance, in its service delivery, operational variety is encouraged, such as provision of multi-channel service delivery and multiple feedback systems. Likewise, members of the organisation are constantly reminded that they need to think unconventionally whenever they are confronted with a problem or given a new task.

## **Highly Committed Leadership**

A very critical aspect in developing a learning organisation is the need for involved leadership. The commitment and involvement of leadership is important not only

because they provide the resources (time, money, people and opportunity) for the learning organisation to develop, they can also be formidable blockers if they do not believe that it is necessary or important to create a learning organisation. In the case of the PSD, both current and previous leadership have been very supportive of the need to build a learning organisation. Whenever the opportunity arises, members of the management team are sent to participate in programmes and activities that enhance their understanding and capabilities in transforming the PSD into a highly effective "learning organisation".

### **Champions at All Levels**

Although involvement of top leadership is a necessary condition for successful development of a learning organisation, it is not sufficient by itself. Along with involved leadership, there is a need to have more "champions" at all levels who are willing to set the stage for continuous learning. The greater the number of people involved, the better the chances of success. In this respect, the establishment of PRISMA is one attempt to get as many people as possible to participate in knowledge sharing and knowledge building towards the development of a learning organisation. Similarly, the minimum seven (7) training days per year requirement is also another attempt at the policy level to ensure more extensive involvement of other members of the organisation in the learning process. In addition, the PSD is always looking out for learning opportunities for its people because it believes in the concept of "learning by doing". Nevertheless, there is still a lot more that can be done in this area to develop more advocators and practitioners of learning organisations.

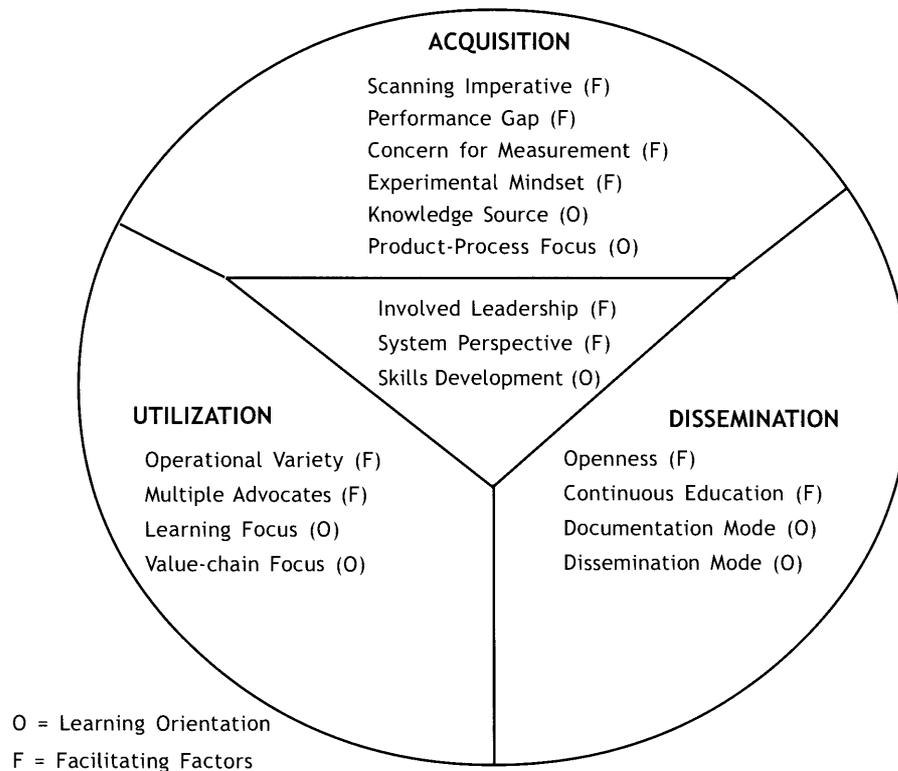
### **Seeing the Big Picture**

Having a systems perspective is also crucial for the development of a learning organisation. In fact, Peter Senge (1990) identified this aspect as the "fifth discipline" in the process of developing a learning organisation. Systems perspective refers to the ability of the key people in the organisation to see the "big picture" or patterns of relationships rather than to focus on "trees" or individual events. Having a systems perspective enables people to take a more holistic view of the situation rather than focusing on the symptoms. In fact, awareness regarding the interdependent nature of organisational variables enables people in the organisation to look at themselves as a possible source of the problem, as opposed to blaming external factors or others whenever a problem arises. As an organisation, the PSD is structured with boundaries between groups and functions. Under such conditions, people tend to behave in a more division-centred manner, where "we" against "them" are being emphasised. This problem is more accentuated if there are people

who have remained in a particular division for a long time. Realising that this may not be healthy for the organisation, more emphasis is given to PSD-centred activities rather than division-centred activities to promote collaboration and learning.

### ENHANCING ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that there are multiple areas or opportunities for enhancing organisational learning. We can choose to improve learning at various stages of the learning process, i.e. acquisition, dissemination, and utilisation. We can also choose to enhance learning by improving aspects of learning orientations that we have neglected. Or we can choose to improve the facilitating factors that are weak or missing. Attempting to improve all fronts and at all levels simultaneously may be too demanding a task. It is advisable to choose a specific area (acquisition, dissemination, and utilisation) to work on in order to enhance learning in the organisation. The next step is to decide whether to work on improving the learning orientations, the facilitating factors, or both components simultaneously. Figure 1 shows the relationship between process, orientation and facilitating factors of organisational learning.



**Figure 1: Elements of Organisational Learning Systems**

Source: Nevis, DiBella, and Gould, 1995

## MEETING FUTURE CHALLENGES: ENHANCING LEARNING CAPABILITIES OF GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Moving from a traditional hierarchical organisation to a learning organisation is not a simple task that can be achieved instantaneously. It involves transformational change that tends to challenge the existing paradigm of how an organisation should be managed. Smith and Taylor (2000) suggest that the degree, to which organisations have aligned their purposes, or reconciled internal conflicts, influences their learning capability. In other words, for successful implementation of transformational change, simultaneous and synergistic actions is required at all fronts, i.e. involving the leadership, people, systems and procedures, structures as well as technology. The above discussion provides some guidelines as to where we can start in helping to transform a government agency into a learning organisation. Although it is an uphill task, given the bureaucratic nature of traditional organisations, it is still possible to transform them into learning organisations. The PSD is currently playing the role of a strategic advocator, strategic designer, strategic capacity-builder, and strategic practitioner in the quest for creating learning organisation across the public service. In terms of strategic advocator, the PSD is taking every opportunity to promote the concept of the learning organisation. As a strategic designer, the PSD designs appropriate programmes, activities and forums for parties concerned to learn together. As a strategic capacity builder, the PSD provides training to enhance the skills, knowledge and attitude of those who need to participate in the learning and collaboration process. As a strategic practitioner, the PSD employs the approaches of a learning organisation and participates actively in the change process. In summary, it is suffice to say that a government agency can become a learning organisation if the leadership, people, structure, systems and processes, and technology can be harnessed to sustain the transformation process.

## REFERENCE

- Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Betts, J. & Holden, R. (2003). *Organizational Learning in the Public Sector: A Case Study in Muddle Thinking*. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 15(6), 280-287.
- Garvin, D. (2000). *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Jamali, D., Khoury, G. & Sahyoun, H. (2006). *From Bureaucratic Organizations to Learning Organizations: An Evolutionary Roadmap*. *The Learning Organization*, 13(4), 337-352.
- Kirkbride, P. & Ward, K. (Eds.) (2001). *Globalization: The Internal Dynamic*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Marquardt, M.J. (1996). *Building The Learning Organization: A Systems Approach to Quantum Improvement and Global Success*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mumford, A. (1995) *Learning at the Top*. Berkshire: MCGraw-Hill.
- Nevis, E.C.; DiBella, A.J., & Gould, J.M. (1995). *Understanding Organizations as Learning Systems*. *Sloan Management Review*, 73-85.
- Pedler, M; Burgoyne, J. & Boydell, T (1991). *The Learning Company*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday.
- Smith, K.D. & Taylor, W.G.K. (2000). *The Learning Organization Ideal in Civil Service Organizations: Deriving a Measure*. *The Learning Organization*, 7(4), 195-205.
- Thomas, K. & Allen, S. (2006). *The Learning Organization: A Meta-Analysis of Themes in Literature*. *The Learning Organization*, 13(2), 123-139.
- Watkins, K.E. & Marsick, V.J. (1993). *Sculpturing the Learning Organization: Lessons in the Art and Science of Systemic Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wheatley.M.(1999). *Leadership and the New Science*. Berret Koehler.
- Yeo, R. K. (2005). *Revisiting the Roots of Learning Organization: A Synthesis of Learning Organization Literature*. *The Learning Organization*, 12( 4), 368-382.
- Zulkurnain Hj. Awang & Sta. Maria, R. (2001). *Developing a Learning Culture in a K-based Economy*. Papers presented in the Sixth National Civil Service Conference, National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN), Kuala Lumpur.