

LENSES FOR LEARNING

by

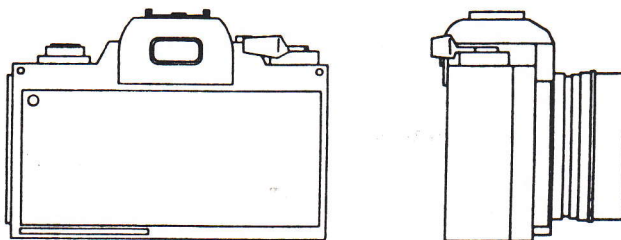
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Barb Perry of Groton, MA is a partner in the Iowa group.

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Lenses for Learning (illustration 1)



Every way of seeing is a way of not seeing

The Learning Organization - something we all want - is an elusive concept, and an inspirational ideal. As we strive to achieve it for ourselves, or to enable others, we find it slow

going. What invisible forces hamper our progress?

Working as an anthropologist, assisting organizations in learning how to learn, I've seen a pattern of

behavior come up repeatedly in all manner of organizational cultures. I've come to believe the source is our lenses on learning - the cultural and historical biases we bring to the learning situation.

Our lenses are the key to organizational learning. They are the assumptions we can't see. Normally, we look through our lenses. The real payoff comes from taking them off, holding them at arm's distance, and looking at them to better understand how they limit what we see, and therefore what we do. By increasing awareness of the choices built into our lenses, we gain control and flexibility; we become more effective learners both individually and together.

What follows is a description of the four attributes of our lenses on learning that really stand out as roadblocks to our ability to make the learning organization a reality. All

Heroes (illustration 2)



quotations are from managers working at walking their talk.

Individualism

The Lone Ranger was not about team. Our heroes face the world alone - self-reliant, rugged individuals. Learning together involves coming face to face with our interdependency, our uncertainty, and our vulnerability. It is not an easy fit with John Wayne norms.

HOW IT FEELS: *"It's a risk being in an environment where I don't have all the answers. This way of working*

breaks the hero mentality. Our business culture is, 'Have all the answers'."

Our heroes are superhuman. We preserve the appearance of being able to pull anything off.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: *"We act like supermen. We're so reticent to say we can't do something. We give leadership the impression that all's well. Those who say it's not are treated like skunks at a lawn party."*

The learning organization requires us to redefine heroism as collaboration and the courage to be a learner,

including truthfulness about risk, shortfall and failure. Only then can we use all experience as grist for learning.

The learning pictures we bring into the workplace are uncollaborative. For most of us, learning occurred in a judgmental context where people succeeded or failed individually, rewarded in comparison to someone else.

We learned that we win or lose alone, at the mercy of a bell-shaped curve that precludes us all from getting A's. We learn early on to hoard our knowledge.

HOW IT FEELS: *"I feel vulnerable both personally and professionally. Personally because I have to give, to share myself, my values, my sacred cows. And then I have to give information about how things really work - knowledge that gave me power in the organization. That meant I had an empty bag to fill each day when I gave it away. It put the responsibility on me to get new learnings because I don't like the feeling of not having an extra edge. Personally I felt great, but professionally, because of the reward and recognition system of the company, I felt vulnerable."*

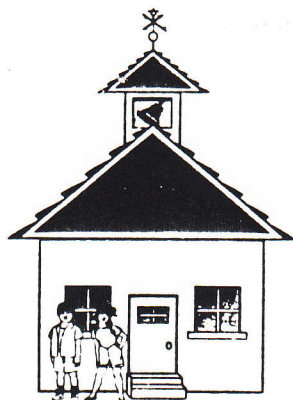
Impatience

We're a restless tribe. Our attention span is short. We like to move on and begin again. For sure, our action orientation is an asset, but in the learning organization, it must be balanced, or at least informed with, reflection. This means slowing down. We know that learning is not a process of steady, visible progress. There are periods of what look like standing still, or even regression, that precede breakthroughs. How many organizations understand and have patience with the plateaus?

Our impatience button, the "just get on with it" scenario, is further exacerbated by the passivity we associate with learning. We think of learning more as receiving information than as creating knowledge. We just don't have time, because what we value is the doing.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: *"In this Type A environment, action, both*

Our Learning Pictures (illustration 3)



Passive Learning (illustration 4)



Thanks largely to the language and methods of total quality we are beginning to appreciate the rewards of a process orientation. Perhaps our interest in learning organizations and learning how to learn, besides being a competitive necessity, also indicates a broadening and maturing of our lenses. With increased awareness of our lenses, we can help ourselves and our organizations examine, understand operationally, and modify our learning assumptions and behaviors. We can use knowledge of our lenses to create processes that

productive and non-productive, is viewed as goodness. There is not much support for taking the time to reflect on what is trying to be achieved, what are the critical obstacles, what we have learned from past changes, how people are feeling."

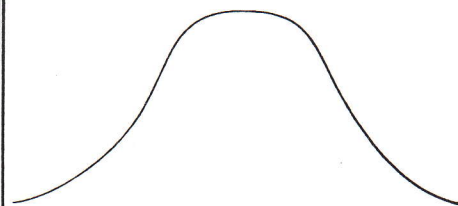
Outcome Orientation

Our obsession with outcomes and goals over process is, more than anything else, what gets in the way of our ability to learn. We are single-mindedly preoccupied with success or failure in a world where results are what count, not the journey. We value the What, not the How, but organizational learning resides in the

apparent then in the organization's measurement system.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: "One of the things that gets in the way of organizational learning is making metrics. People will do anything to make a metric. The goal changes from finding a new way to do things to covering up the evidence of old ways and making them look good. People actually collude, and no one blows the whistle which leads to the outcome of having politics lead over logic, facts, and good sound business judgment. It explains why good ideas take years to get off the ground if they fly at all. Pushing for overnight business improvements only leads to

Our Learning Pictures:
Uncollaborative
(illustration 5)



Our Learning Pictures: (illustration 6)



How's, the processes by which things happen. This is nowhere more

the game of making metrics. If you've survived, you've played the game."

will assist in the transition to organizations capable of energizing and utilizing our enormous untapped potential for learning together.

The modern Greek poet Seferis, writes in his poem, *Ithaca*, of Ulysses' ten year journey home. Roughly paraphrased, it begins as an ode to the Learning Organization:

*When you come out to start
the journey to Ithaca
You should wish that the road
be long
Full of mis-steps and full of
knowledge.*