Embracing change: a leadership model for the learning organisation

James R. Johnson

Accelerating environmental change has allowed theorists and practitioners to envision an organisational entity known as the learning organisation. The phrase ‘learning organisation’ has existed in the literature for several decades. More than other writers, Senge has popularised the term in the 1990s. However, other writers have made significant contributions to this topic. Woolner, for example, developed a model that identified five distinct stages through which organisations progress on the way to becoming learning organisations. A needed link in the literature should portray a model of leadership and the stages of a learning organisation. The model proposed by this author utilises the three leadership behaviours of visioning, empowerment, and leading-learning, and is offered as a catalyst for improved practice as well as food for thought for researchers who aspire to build theoretical relationships between the topics.

The topic of the learning organisation has commanded a great deal of attention in the first half of the current decade. Senge’s writing was an important work in the avalanche of literature on the subject[1]. This has been followed by several books, articles, and monographs by additional authors who have shared viewpoints on the subject. In fact, an entire industry has been spawned around this elusive concept.

Although the literature base pertaining to learning organisations is expansive, the vast majority of the writing is descriptive in nature. Minimal writing offers suggestions to senior managers for transforming their organisation into learning organisations. Questions remain as to how senior managers and CEOs might apply specific leadership behaviours that foster organisational learning. Argyris, commenting on barriers to organisational learning, stated that most “researchers did not focus upon producing actionable knowledge on how to reduce or lower these barriers. In those cases where they did, the advice was either disconnected from the world of practice

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or, when carefully examined, the advice could actually strengthen the very barriers that were supposed to be overcome”[2]. Kim provided further evidence of this ambiguity by writing that “The topic of organisational learning has gained a lot of attention, but there is little agreement on what organisational learning means and even less on how to create a learning organisation”[3].

**Accelerating environmental change**

Toffler raised the world’s consciousness regarding the accelerating rate of change in his 1970 work, *Future Shock*[4]. He discussed the overwhelming impact of change on individuals, society, and organisations. More importantly, he raised our collective awareness of the importance of adapting to change, of responding to the inevitability of change, and of recognizing the irony that attempting to “prophesy is extremely difficult—especially with respect to the future”[5].

Toffler’s was not the earliest reference to change in the literature. In approximately 500 BC the Greek philosopher Heraclitus was reported to have thought about the idea of change and the inherent contradictions in nature[6]. He stepped into a river and “speculated that a person could not step twice in the same river because the river was continuously flowing and changing”.

Similar water analogies are used by contemporary writers to depict the nature of change and organisational leadership. Wheatley wrote of pondering with one’s feet in a stream, wondering about the diversity of the water, and its “ability to adapt, to shift the configurations, and let the power balance move, to create new structures”[7].

These analogies depict the ebb and flow of change as it occurs in a global market economy. Industries such as telecommunications, semi-conductors, and consumer electronics experience major technological changes with increased frequency, and absorb major market shifts at a rapid pace[8]. Even heretofore stable businesses such as food distribution can sustain rapid change in short periods of time. Painfully clear to many organisations is that “they will not survive if they do not change”[9], and the only constant in today’s environment is change[10]. Organisations that will survive and prosper in the future will do so because they have successfully understood and proactively embraced change.

Lewin’s model of unfreezing, changing, then refreezing has served as the foundation for the work of several authors[11]. Felkins, Chakiris, and Chakiris[12] describe change as having the following characteristics: it has contradictions, it is continuous, it is interpreted by the thoughts of those affected by it, and it can be facilitated[12]. Watkins and Marsick describe the organisational change process as a cycle that includes creating knowledge, disseminating knowledge, instituting the change, and institutionalizing the change[13].

Contemporary life is fraught with constant and accelerating change[14]. The more adept we become at “speculating about, or trying to anticipate future events”, the more effective we will become, individually or organisationally[15]. Dixon wrote that “Learning is the critical competency of the 1990s”[16]. Whereas writers may debate whether it is the critical competency, learning in the workplace has been acknowledged as an important ingredient of organisational change. Verlander carries this idea one step further[17]. He said that managing the “speed, direction, and intensity of strategic and organisational change will make the difference between the winners and losers in the decade ahead”. Losers will be unable to recognise, react to, and manage change; winners will recognise, react to, manage, and prosper in a changing environment. Revans[18] noted that learning must be greater than or equal to the rate of change for the firm to survive. If learning is not equal to the rate of change, the firm is falling behind, and slowly dying.

Organisations that survive in the future will manage their organisational structures, leadership, processes, competencies, and practices to allow sufficient flexibility to adapt to change. Toffler proposed that ‘bureaucratic practices’ must be eliminated to permit the organisation to ebb and flow along with, rather than against, the changing environment[19]. The resulting actions would create “a kaleidoscopically chang-
ing organizational structure built upon highly transient human relationships”[20]. The mechanistic thinking that characterised the industrial age is a flawed response to the contemporary global economy. Systemic thinking that incorporates learning as a strategic competitive advantage in an organisation’s business plan is now needed.

The learning organisation and accelerating change

A supporting rationale for the learning organisation lies in the belief that change and learning are “inextricably linked”[21]. Adapting, responding, anticipating, and learning are descriptors commonly used to envision learning organisations. Toffler used the term “ad-hocracy” to explain the predecessor to contemporary descriptions of the learning organisation[22].

A central tenet to their creation is that learning organisations help people and organisations “embrace change”[23]. Learning organisations are designed to anticipate and react to changing external and competitive environments in a positive and proactive manner. Learning organisations help to institute internal organisational structures that are better able to respond to the turbulence of change[24].

Exactly what is a learning organisation? Senge defines the learning organisation as one “where people continuously 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 how to learn together”[25].

Dissecting Senge’s definition yields a degree of clarity to this somewhat nebulous entity. His definition describes expanding the “capacity to create”. This capacity for creation distinguishes learning organisations more so than any other characteristic. Learning organisations are not those that lie in waiting; they are intended to initiate and forcefully create. They should be designed to generate new knowledge at a speed that will benefit them in their race against changing environmental dangers and opportunities.

Senge’s definition also describes learning organisations as having the “ability to create the results they truly desire”. Learning organisations are better able to achieve because of their capacity to learn from past experience.

“New and expansive patterns of thinking” denote the capacity of learning organisations to creatively problem solve and form judgments. “Collective aspiration” identifies the group nature of learning organisations, and that a shared vision is critical to success.

Finally, “learning how to learn together” encompasses both the elusiveness and importance of learning how to learn in an organisational context. The late Robert Smith of Northern Illinois University spent a lifetime clarifying this elusive concept. “Learning how to learn involves possessing, or acquiring, the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in whatever learning situation one encounters” is Smith’s definition[26].

Learning organisations do not happen automatically, but require a deep commitment to building required skills throughout the workplace. Watkins and Marsick indicate that a long-term commitment must be made at the absolute pinnacle of the organisation[27]. Redding and Catalanello stress that speed, depth, and breadth of learning must be managed at various levels within the organisation[28]. McGill, Slo-cum and Lei[29] conclude that learning organisations “learn from their experiences rather than being bound by” them (authors’ italics), whereas Watkins and Marsick[30] postulate that the “learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself’. Learning, then, is comprised of various components that require management. Just like any other process within the organization, such as communication or decision making, learning must be managed successfully.
Woolner’s developmental model lends additional clarity


The first stage, “The Forming Organisation” posits that organisations are learning by doing outside a formal learning structure. New start-up organisations are best suited to this learning organisation stage. Much of the learning in stage one occurs by trial and error and in the ordinary course of providing products or services to its customer base.

“The Developing Organisation” is Woolner’s term for stage two organisations. In this stage, organisations recognise the need for more formal learning, and they begin to acquire learning or training from outside suppliers. Individuals receive training experiences from outside the organisation, but learning is not perceived as a normal operation of the organisation.

Woolner calls stage three “The Mature Organisation”. The connection between learning and economic advantages become apparent to the organisation in the third stage. The organisation recognises that it can gain advantages of scale by conducting in-house training experiences for its employees. Learning, however, is still considered an off-line activity, and learning is not institutionalised as a normal operation of the organisation.

“The Adapting Organisation” is stage four. At this stage, the linkage emerges between the organisation’s strategic objectives and learning. Individual, group, and organisational goals are deemed to require skill levels that are not present within the organisation. Learning in stage four is still viewed as an off-line activity, and is not yet fully integrated into the organisation’s strategic agenda.

Leadership has fully institutionalised learning into the organisation in Woolner’s fifth stage, “The Learning Organisation”. Learning becomes part of the daily operation of the organisation, and is performed on-line. Learning is rewarded, recognised as critical to the success of the firm, and implemented as part of the strategic planning process.

In this final stage, learning exists at all levels of the organisation and input from workers is valued regardless of their organisational level[32]. Groups and teams function cohesively in the fifth stage. Organisations learn from their history, current experiences, and practices of other organisations[33]. The stage five organisation is open to both formal and informal learning experiences. This learning is transmitted quickly and easily among individuals and groups within the organisation[34]. This, according to Woolner’s model, is the epitome of the learning organisation.

Examining leadership in the context of the learning organisation

What is leadership? Woolner’s stage five learning organisation “will remain a distant vision until leadership capabilities they demand are developed”[35]. But what are these leadership capabilities, and how specifically can they be developed? Bennis noted that “Leaders are people who do the right things, managers are people who do things right”[36]. The concept of leadership is nearly as ambiguous as that of the learning organisation. Wheatley calls leadership “an amorphous phenomenon that has intrigued us since people began studying organisations”[37].

The central question of this article is: what types of leadership qualities are needed in learning organisations? Two assumptions are in order. First, learning organisations require different leadership qualities from traditional organisational models[38]. “Subtler and ultimately more important work” is one description of the leadership required in learning organisations[39]. Second, leadership of learning organisations is needed from the top of the organisation. Argyris stated that top management must have ownership of change initiatives to prevent the “not invented here” syn-
drome[40]. This syndrome is frequently prevalent when change initiatives begin at lower levels of the organisation. People tend to resist change if they had no part in initiating it. This is particularly true of top management. Watkins and Marsick indicated that active participation by top levels of management is needed to effect change successfully, and that learning organisations cannot be built from within the training department[41].

This is not to suggest that leaders at the top of an organisation direct every move. Senge stated that one person cannot learn for the entire organisation as Henry Ford, Tom Watson, or Alfred Sloan once were able to do[42]. He later reaffirmed this view when he described the traditional Western view of leadership[43]. He noted that ideas are extracted from the heads of those at the top of the organisation and implanted in the heads of those at the bottom.

Redding and Catalanello, however, did not share this viewpoint[44]. They recommended that pockets of learning can form within an organisation and may be shared with the rest of the organisation. They assert that change can occur in isolated parts of the organisation, and that senior management does not necessarily need to mandate change for it to occur.

Several wide angle views are offered by researchers regarding leadership requirements in learning organisations. Regarding this leadership paradigm, London called for a “prospective orientation, or what might be called future-jobs analysis” (author’s italics)[45]. Barrow and Laughlin identified four main responsibilities; creating a vision, creating an atmosphere of trust, scanning the environment for threats and opportunities, and developing employees[46]. Marquardt and Reynolds suggested four new roles and three new skills[47].

Three themes emerge from the literature base that merit further consideration: visioning, empowerment, and the leader’s role in learning.

Visioning. The ability to create a collective vision of the future with other members of the organisation appears to be a crucial skill for leaders of learning organisations[48]. Communicating the common vision to the organisation seems to be of collateral importance[49]. Marquardt and Reynolds[50] refer to the “flow of information throughout the organization worldwide”. Senge[51] calls this the “purpose story”, or the “story—the overarching explanation of why they do what they do”[52]. He describes this “creative tension” as the force that can move followers towards the vision by allowing them to share it while understanding their current reality[53].

Empowerment. A second theme that emerges from the literature deals with empowerment. Marsick defines empowerment as “interactive, mutual decision making about work challenges in which power for work outcomes is truly shared”[54]. Linda Honold, formerly director of member development at Johnsonville Foods, is quoted as saying that “the learning organization is the result of empowerment”[55]. Denton and Wisdom noted that leaders must be able to “engage their workforce”[56]. Block reminded us, as part of his proposal that stewardship can be an alternative to leadership, that focusing power on the top of the organisation destroys the culture[57]. His remedy was to ask the organisation’s membership, regardless of level, to define its mission.

Coincident with the notion of empowerment is the ability of the followers to accept power and apply it purposefully for the enterprise. Empowerment allows organisation members to take risks. Power dispensed to followers, but not skilfully received, accepted, or utilized by followers is a misnomer. Empowerment rests in the followers’ realm as well as the leader’s. It cannot be “prescribed”, but must be provided in the context of the organisational culture, systems, and structure[58]. To convey that people are empowered without providing support contradicts the essence of a learning organisation.

Redding and Catalanello remind us, however, that empowerment can be threatening to some leaders[59]. Leaders may perceive that empowering others may diminish their own power base, while it can be argued that just the opposite is true.

Leading-learning. A third theme from the literature involves the leader’s role in learning. Argyris[60] calls it the competence of “leading-learning”. Marquardt and
Reynolds indicate that the leader must model continuous learning[61]. Barrow indicates that this new kind of leadership will, by necessity, tie learning to strategy[62]. The resulting learning will be tied to the strategic objectives of the organisation, and will be targeted at performance improvement, the highest stage of organisational learning[63].

Senge[64] proposes that leaders need to be responsible for learning by building learning organisations, while Bennis[65] writes that leaders must value learning. Bennis and Nanus[66] argue that leaders become expert at learning in the “organisational context”, while Argyris insists that leaders must learn how to learn, Senge and others state that leaders must assume the role of teacher in learning organisations[67].

**Leadership qualities and the learning organisation**

The three themes of the preceding section indicate intriguing links between the qualities of leadership and the creation of learning organisations. Leadership qualities that revolve around visioning, empowerment, and leading-learning can be aligned with Woolner’s five stage developmental model to gestate a Leadership Model for the Learning Organisation (see Figure 1). The purpose of the model is to provide the readership with a schema for imaging the relationships of leadership variables and the evolving status of a learning organisation. The following narrative examines the possible links between select leadership qualities and desired states of the learning organisation.

**Stage one: The Forming Organisation**

In stage one, the organisation is beginning on its journey towards becoming a learning organisation. It is important that the process of visioning is undertaken at this early stage. Facilitating and communicating the shared vision is the leader’s highest priority at this early stage, and the organisation’s energy needs to be devoted to this groundwork activity. The visioning process will provide the line-drawing of the organisation’s desired state. This line-drawing will be completed by those within the

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**Figure 1: A learning organisation leadership model**

*(1 = low, 5 = high)*
organisation at later stages. Empowering is difficult at this early stage because the vision is not yet clear.

**Stage two: The Developing Organisation**

As the organisation merges into stage two, the visioning process has established the sights for the organisation in its quest for the more desirous stage of a learning organisation. Empowerment can be increased in this developing stage since the clarity of vision now serves as a motivator to members of the organisation. ‘Leading-learning’ can be increased in direct proportion to the amount of clarity of the organisation’s vision. In this stage, leaders should begin to model the role that learning will play in the future of the organisation.

**Stage three: The Mature Organisation**

Visioning and ‘leading-learning’ behaviours are vital in stage three. Visioning must be steadily reduced, while ‘leading-learning’ is increased in equal proportions throughout the five stages. The importance of ‘leading-learning’ is increasing as the organisation begins to appreciate the importance of learning as a key tactic for creating the desired future state. Empowerment is also increased in stage three. The strategic vision is now well developed at this stage, and the leader’s role in learning is becoming increasingly important to the members of the organisation.

**Stage four: The Adapting Organisation**

The behaviours in stage four are marked by the steady increase in visioning behaviours, and a proportional increase in empowerment, and ‘leading-learning’. The organisation’s vision of becoming a learning organisation is becoming integrated into the daily operations of the firm at this stage. It is crucial at this stage to stay on course with the process, although there may be outside influences that impact on growth and development. The tendency at this stage will be to abandon the quest due to economic fluctuations or short term profit motives.

**Stage five: The Learning Organisation**

Stage five is the desired state for the organisation. The visioning behaviours must simply be maintained at this stage, while empowerment and the leader’s role in learning are at optimal levels. At this stage the favourable characteristics of a learning organisation are within reach.

The journey through Woolner’s five stages can be facilitated through leadership qualities associated with the three leadership qualities of visioning, empowerment, and leading-learning. These leadership qualities can be powerful influences that can play upon the success of strategies of a learning organisation.

**Implications for the field**

Unrelenting, accelerating change in the global economy has spawned an organisational entity known as the learning organisation. These organisations are considered to be adaptive to the environment and responsive to change. Members within learning organisations have learned to anticipate and embrace change. This article poses a model for imagining relationships among qualities of leadership and the evolving status of a learning organisation.

Three themes emerged from the literature that can serve as a framework for examining these relationships. First, the leaders need to cooperatively create and communicate a shared vision of the future on which the organisation can focus. Second, leaders need to empower those who follow. Third, leaders must assume a strong
role relative to learning. They must be responsible for creating a learning culture, while focusing efforts on learning.

These leadership themes, when aligned with Woolner’s five stage model, provide a framework for a Learning Organisation Leadership Model. Depending on the stage at which the organisation finds itself, the emphasis on the leadership themes can be increased or decreased to allow the organisation to move towards the desired stages of a learning organisation.

As noted earlier in this article, the literature of the learning organisation may be depicted as murky at best. Likewise, the literature pertaining to leadership can be described as an amorphous gel that is slippery to grasp. The intent of this writing is to help readers sense relationships between these two literature bases. Woolner’s five stage developmental model brings clarity to the evolution of a learning organisation. The leadership qualities of visioning, empowering, and leading-learning provide a visual classification for the leadership literature. When juxtaposed, a model emerges for applying leadership qualities in the evolving process of creating a learning organisation. The author challenges both theorists and fellow practitioners to ‘play’ with these relationships and help the field spawn a deeper understanding of the interplay between leadership and the evolution to a learning organisation.

Acknowledgement

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