

# Accelerating Shared Learning for Business Results

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Sharing best practices around the world.. .moving from bureaucracy to entrepreneurial enterprise.. .gaining authentic commitment at all levels.. .repositioning global organizations.. .these are the critical challenges facing modern corporations. How do they meet them and come out ahead of the pack? How do they create cultures that not only accept but encourage innovation and adaptivity? At Arthur D. Little, we have found that the ability to accelerate shared learning processes is an essential component of effective and sustainable change.

Companies that need to solve complex business problems of strategic direction and process improvement have discovered that „solutions“ – new visions, strategic directions, and reengineering processes – are not enough. To make these solutions work, there must be a fundamental change in the way that people involved in the work share and build on their learning. No matter how dazzling the organization’s new vision is, unless the people involved „own“ the process of defining and adapting to new ways, the organization can’t generate the acceptance and enrollment necessary to build and sustain real change.

In order for human beings to accept and rise to the challenge of change, distinct learning processes need to occur. At the Arthur D. Little School of Management, we are applying the principles of accelerated shared learning’ to help leading organizations meet difficult management challenges. What is accelerated shared learning, and how can organizations use it to increase business results? In this article, we first set forth some general principles, observing the effects of accelerated shared learning in three real-life examples, and then offer some practical guidelines for accelerating shared learning in your organization.

## Principles of Accelerated Shared Learning

*Principle 1. Learning is most effective when it addresses issues and objectives that are important to the learners.*

We often ask senior managers with whom we are working, „When have you learned something really well, in any part of your lives?“ Invariably, they identify learning that took place either when they really wanted to learn something, or when they needed to learn something in order to reach other objectives.

We also ask these managers what they most care about. This question puts them directly in touch with what they really want to accomplish. It is important to use the natural energy of desire when accelerating learning and change. The first principle of accelerated shared learning taps this energy in order to increase velocity and acceptance of change.

At Lufthansa, in Germany, senior managers needed to respond to the demands of a changing environment as they shifted from managing in a centralized bureaucracy to leading newly entrepreneurial subsidiaries that had been made independent profit centers. They looked to Arthur D. Little and the principles of accelerated shared learning to help their managers gain a new understanding of their roles in leading their organizations effectively. As the general managers participating in the Lufthansa In-House General Managers Program began to imagine where they wanted their subsidiaries in the future, they were able to break out of their reliance on the patterns and structures of the bureaucratic past and begin to accept the uncertainties of rapid change. We invited them to write newspaper stories dated two years in the future, describing the successes their enterprises had accomplished by that time. This work focused their thinking and planning together.

Senior managers in Korea’s LG Group were looking to become global leaders in their major industries. However, they had inherited a hierarchical management structure and an organizational culture that did not encourage individual expression. They needed to break out of patterns that would hold them back from achieving the levels of innovation and creativity necessary for global growth and leadership. Six LG Group presidents met to talk about learning and change leadership. We discussed how the individual’s capacity to imagine the future is crucial to all innovation. I asked them what they cared about deeply and personally, and where they wanted to be in 10 years. Their responses were moving. Some said that they cared about their families, their elderly parents, and winning the trust of their employees. When thinking into the future, they said they wanted to be thought of as people who had led their organizations well, built cultures of trust, and led their industries. (Some also said that they wanted to be alive and in good health, not a „burden to their families.“)

The participants in this conversation commented that this was the first time they had talked with each other in this way. Their traditional educational system had trained them only to receive and exchange knowledge, not to see themselves as creators of new knowledge based in aspiration. But without aspiration, there can be no pull toward innovation and creativity. This is why the first step to effective change leadership is to identify one’s own goals and share them with others. Introducing them to sharing their aspirations established a foundation on which they could authentically explore their shared strategic goals.

Like aspiration, authenticity is essential to accelerating shared learning. Employees know when a manager is merely spouting the company line. At Otis Elevator, senior managers from around the world were seeking to

share best practices worldwide. They found that even great ideas were not well received when transferred to other parts of the organization. They faced the challenge of creating an environment of openness to new ideas. When I asked these senior global managers to share their own visions for the future, we launched a lively and generative debate about whether everyone really embraced the company vision. Their willingness to be honest about this and to confront each other with their genuine questions and concerns enabled them to open up a process of examining and developing new global imperatives. For each of their global imperatives, they were able to tap into the creative thinking of managers around the world. The senior leaders were struck by both the creativity and the natural alignment of their managers in formulating visions and plans for implementation. Through their interaction, they saw that they needed their collective wisdom in order to create a comprehensive vision of the future.

*Principle 2. People learn most effectively when they learn with others.*

Only by sharing our thinking with others are we able to test our own assumptions and build on others' perceptions. Our own view of the world is partial and based on our internal belief structures, which bias our perceptions. One of the ways shared learning creates value is by overcoming this limitation.

At Otis Elevator, North American Regional General Managers wanted to meet the challenge of sharing best practices. They saw that in order to do this they had to begin to take the risk of admitting what they didn't know, acting as true colleagues and „co-experimenters“ with each other. In order to overcome the natural resistance to adopting other people's ideas, they needed to use shared learning to increase receptivity and willingness to change.

Rather than design a typical management meeting in which there are a series of presentations on best practices, they designed a meeting in which groups of managers could come together to discuss their biggest business challenges – the ones they had not yet been able to solve. Working together with their colleagues from across North America, these managers approached the issue of best practices from the perspective of shared learning, and they made breakthroughs together. They also learned and reinforced the importance of replicating this shared learning process at other levels in the organization.

Shared learning works best among people who are skilled in what David Bohm has called dialogue, which is essentially the art of listening deeply to other people and clearly explicating one's own thinking.<sup>7</sup> At Otis Elevator, conscious practice of this kind of dialogue has had an impact throughout the organization. As Sandy Diehl, Otis Elevator's Vice President of Marketing for North American Operations, reflected, „Now, people in meetings are conscious about whether they are listening to and learning from each other.“

Another important skill is reflection: „Don't just do something, sit there!“ However, business managers are trained for action and speed – hence the „ready, fire, aim“ mentality now prevalent in so many organizations. Far too often, thinking is seen as a luxury, and collective thinking as an aberration. The link between shared understanding and effective collective action is not widely understood or recognized. Under these circumstances, asking managers to accelerate shared learning is asking them to unlearn the fundamental behaviors that they have used throughout their careers. This unlearning requires a shift in their basic assumptions.

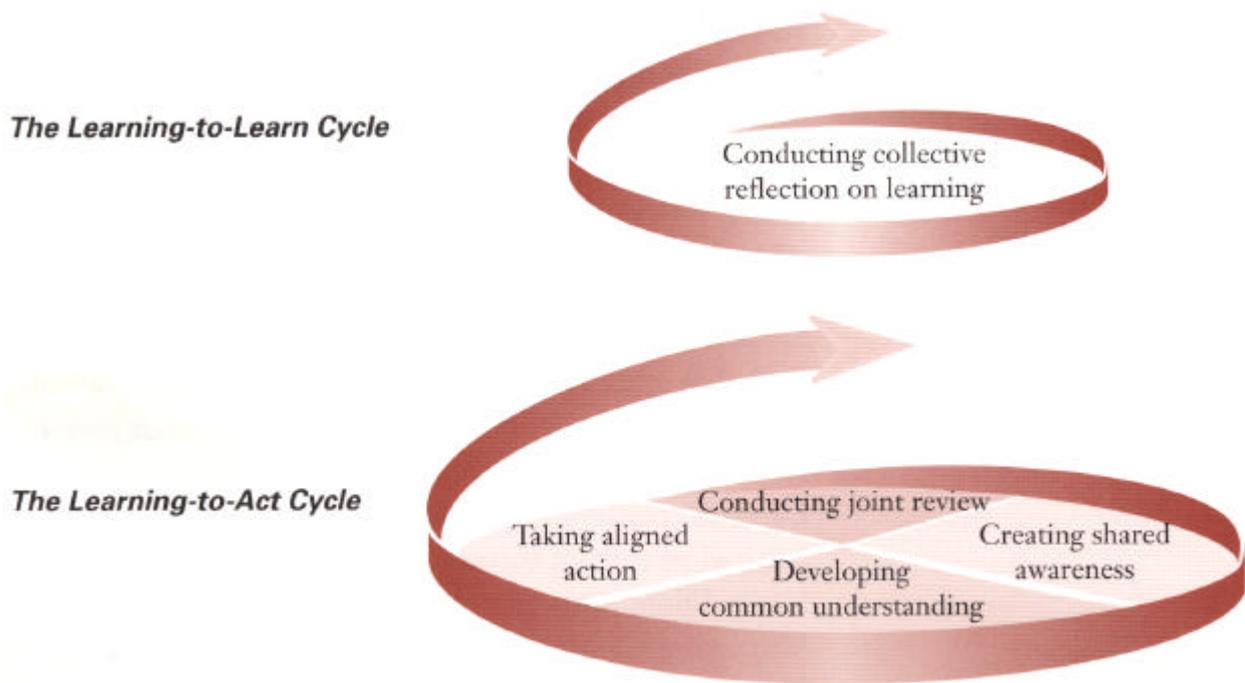
A tool that can help accomplish this shift is a shared model of how organizational learning actually works. At Lufthansa, once the managers involved had identified their aspirations, they used Arthur D. Little's model of the organizational learning cycle (Exhibit 1) to begin to shift these basic assumptions and design plans for building shared learning and action. The cycle starts with shared awareness and moves to common understanding and then to aligned action, followed by joint review and then collective reflection on the shared learning process.

As the managers began to design plans to implement their aspirations for their new subsidiaries, they saw that issuing orders or policies would be insufficient to achieve change on the scale that was necessary. Working in groups, they devised plans for creating shared awareness of their current conditions, customer needs, and goals. Then they designed the types of interventions necessary for building common understanding of the implications of this data. Neither of these activities had ever been on their agendas as managers. Their understanding of the ADL organizational learning model retrained their understanding of their jobs. Seeing themselves as managers of shared learning enabled them to plan the new management activities to accomplish their new entrepreneurial objectives.

At Otis Elevator, when regional general managers were exposed to the organizational learning cycle, they recognized that they, like most managers, typically jumped quickly to action plans without creating the shared awareness or the common understanding necessary to fulfill those plans. Without shared learning as the foundation of organizational effectiveness, organizations are doomed to continually repeat the error of pushing action without building understanding and commitment.

## Exhibit 1

### The Processes of Organizational Learning



To accelerate shared learning, there needs to be a shift in managers' thinking from „I lead“ to „we learn.“ It is a fundamental shift, from viewing the individual manager as problem solver to seeing the manager as the creator of an accelerated shared learning environment. Understanding and using the organizational learning cycle enables managers to design the types of activities to create this learning environment.

*Principle 3. Our beliefs determine our perceptions and actions.*

We see what we believe. Our perceptions, points of view, beliefs, biases, prejudices, all select and color the data we receive. We are all exquisite instruments, able to perceive and conceive the world. Collectively, we are the consciousness of the natural world. Within organizations, each individual is responsible for developing the ability to perceive, create interpretations, and share and test those interpretations with others. Only in this way can organizations build accurate responses to their „reality.“

When I first met Chairman Hun Jo Lee, then the chairman of LG Electronics, he asked me, „Can my people learn?“ I answered, „I don't know. Do you believe they can learn?“ Chairman Lee, who is a thoughtful man, a Confucian scholar by training, was silent for several moments. Then he declared, „Yes, I believe they can.“ „Good,“ I said. „Now we can start.“

The breakthrough for the Lufthansa managers came when they realized that their beliefs about the employees at Lufthansa would color how they designed their change and learning process. At one point they held a heated debate among themselves about whether the people in their organizations were capable of change. One manager stated that „people here don't want to work very hard.“ In rebuttal, another senior manager defended the Lufthansa employees as being the backbone that enabled the company to survive a massive restructuring and downsizing. The exploration of the managers' beliefs about the employees and their capacity for change was a critical turning point. If the managers had not shared these assumptions, they would have been unable to design plans for accelerating shared learning and productivity.

It is important to realize the limits of our own perceptions. Recent research shows that as much as 70 percent of perception occurs inside the brain. Only 20 – 30 percent is actually determined by the impulses coming into us. So, our beliefs, our assumptions, our „mental models“ all create what we perceive. And most of these beliefs are locked in before we have even reached adulthood. It's a wonder we can perceive new things at all!

Consequently, the first task in initiating shared learning is to create situations in which people feel safe enough to expose their beliefs and assumptions. Only in this way can these be tested and validated. If we hold our beliefs to ourselves, we guarantee that we will become mired in our own circular logic – we believe it, therefore we see it, and what we see confirms what we believe. The only way out is to begin to participate with others in shared learning. Otherwise our perceptions will remain limited, incomplete, and inaccurate. When we facilitate shared

learning, we encourage people to always seek out the minority opinion. The opinion that is most different from yours is the one that is perceiving a radically different part of the situation. It makes smart business sense to find out what that is.

How does this principle apply to solving real business problems? Let's look again at Otis Elevator. Otis was faced with the challenge of gaining commitment from their field mechanics (those who did elevator maintenance and repair) to new service standard procedures. Procedures sent to the field were meeting with a varied reception. Managers felt that the issue was one of effective communication – that is, communication from management to employees. Working together, we used the lens of shared learning to turn the problem around. We asked regional general managers to go out to the field mechanics and interview them, to get the mechanics' thoughts about how to approach the managers' most pressing business problems.

The Otis regional general managers were impressed with the level of insight and information they received from their interviews with the field mechanics. When they approached their employees as learning partners, they found perceptions that were entirely new to them. They were so struck with the level of contribution that they initiated changes in the ways that they made some decisions. One regional general manager immediately put a field mechanic on his management committee. The president made sure to check out the accuracy of a new strategic initiative with a group of field mechanics before he launched it. Rather than give a prepared presentation, he held a meeting without an agenda to solicit feedback about the new initiative. As a result, he uncovered organizational obstacles that had been invisible to senior management. Admitting his willingness to learn from others enabled him to create more effective strategies.

The president also took it one step further. In front of all of his senior managers, he talked about what was most important to him, the value he placed on safety, and his own personal commitment to the work. The group then went on to distinguish what each person was authentically committed to accomplishing. Otis managers report that one of the most profound effects of shared learning has been the widespread understanding of the value of commitment – rather than compliance – as a fundamental precursor to effective action.

### **Implementing Accelerated Shared Learning**

Start with principle one – address the issues and objectives that are most important to the people involved. Find out what people care about and what they are concerned about. Share with them your understanding of your situation, especially the urgency of it. Engage in conversations that encourage people to put forth authentic aspirations about their future and the future of their work in the organization.

Create mechanisms to carry out principle two, sharing learning with others. Organizations are not currently structured for shared learning. Hold meetings with the sole purpose of exploring differing approaches to common challenges. Don't come to premature closure. Use the ADL organizational learning cycle to help you distinguish when you are still in the period of creating shared awareness and common understanding. When you realize that your actions are not being carried out in an aligned fashion, back up and End mechanisms to share relevant information and create forums for dialogue.

When you are faced with a complex situation, make the best interpretation you can and share it with others. People are hungry to make meaning out of complexity – it provides direction in the midst of confusion. Others will benefit from the interpretations that you make and share.

Be a learner yourself. Demonstrate open inquiry and questioning. When Bob Galvin was the Chairman of Motorola, he said that the quality campaign never got off the ground until he was willing to admit that he didn't know how to do it. Admit your uncertainties and invite others to share in the process of solving problems with you.

Don't be afraid to move to aligned action. Do find out whether you have the authentic understanding and commitment necessary to make big changes. Also, make sure that you have built in time to collectively review the results of those actions. Listen to minority opinions – they may represent perceptions that aren't available to you yet. Only in this way can you continue to accelerate shared learning.

As you move to building an environment of accelerated shared learning, you will find yourself spending less time telling others what to do and more time asking questions. The purpose of your questions will be to engage others in questioning their assumptions and challenging them to think in new, creative, and shared ways. *You* will also be discovering whether people are authentically committed to carrying out policies, or whether you are just receiving „lip service.“ Practicing these principles can help you and your organization benefit from the shared knowledge and commitment of all your colleagues. And that shared learning, in turn, can unleash the innovation necessary to be a contender in these times of rapid change.

<sup>1</sup>*This work is an outgrowth of ADL's ongoing work on organizational learning. For more information, refer to Prism, third quarter 1995.*

*2 For more information, see Dialogue, David Bohm, Ojai Institute, Ojai California, 1989.*

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