The Role of Leadership in a Learning Organization

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Many executives are now realizing that building the learning capability of their organizations is critical to achieving their business strategy. But this recognition raises some difficult questions. With all the demands on already-scarce company resources, where will the energy come from to create a learning organization? And if you do manage to find – or create – the necessary energy, how can you sustain that energy over time? This article will address these questions and their implications for CEOs and senior leadership teams.

From Individual Energy to Collaborative Action

In our work with executive teams, we often help them begin the search for the energy for organizational learning by having them reflect on their own life experiences. In particular, we invite them to focus on a time when they were part of a group of people working on something truly important, both to the group and to themselves as individuals. Invariably, this exercise leads to insights about the energy required to create and sustain learning. People describe those special experiences as extraordinary: „We had a very focused objective," „There was a lot of energy," and „It felt like the difference between a laser and ordinary light." Very often people report highly focused energy. And when you probe a little deeper, they'll often talk about the learning that went on, working with a group of people who were focusing on something that was really important to them.

When we've interviewed teams who've done extraordinary things, such as inventing a completely new product or even a new industry, they've talked about meetings that started at 5 p.m. and ended at 1 a.m. At the end of that time they had created something that no one had thought possible when they started – yet in thinking about the creative process nobody could remember exactly who said what. This blurring of roles and contributions was not motivated by modesty. They weren't trying to be polite and say, „They, not I, deserve the credit." They actually couldn't remember who said what, because the learning came out of the team itself, out of its shared energy.

We believe that it is possible to build what we call a learning organization out of this very energy. In fact, we would go further: it's not just possible but highly probable that virtually everyone in your organization can feel connected to this effort, with their energy aligned and channeled toward strategic business objectives to produce extraordinary results over time. Ultimately, a company or institution whose energies are aligned in this way will create the future that its members most want. The question is, first, how to make it happen, and then, how to make it sustainable? How do you broadly engage the members of the organization? How do you generate and then align their energy?

Making Learning Work

Learning – individual learning, team learning, and organizational learning – is a very powerful energy source. The renowned anthropologist Edward Hall argues that learning, the desire to learn, and curiosity are more fundamental human motives even than the drive to reproduce. That gives you a benchmark on the energy potential here!

The challenge then, is to focus this energy and make sure it's aligned toward business objectives. The notion of alignment is key. Alignment takes place when a group of individuals works as one, with a deeply shared sense of purpose and vision. This is very different from agreement. Aligned teams often fight like cats and dogs about the best way to achieve the results to which they are so passionately committed. Alignment of individuals is powerful, but insufficient. The organizational processes, systems, and structures must also be aligned. Asking committed people to work hard for their dreams in systems and structures that undermine their efforts creates cynicism and disillusionment. In Exhibit 1, the small blue arrows represent individual players or business units. In an unaligned organization, these arrows point in many different directions. You don't see a lot of forward motion. Unfortunately, this lack of alignment is typical of most organizations.

What does it feel like to be part of an unaligned organization? Most people report feelings of frustration, anger, and even hostility. The people they crash into every day are not outside forces or competitors but members of their own teams or organizations.

An aligned organization, in contrast, shows a very different pattern of energy. The arrows are more lined up, although there's still a good deal of freedom and choice in the movement of individual arrows. Here is a fundamentally different force field that generates an amplifying effect as each member contributes his or her energy to the forward motion of the whole.

Achieving this kind of alignment, however, is not simple. Paradoxically, trying to create alignment is almost the surest way to guarantee you won't have it. Innovation Associates, in some 15 years' experience working in this area, has found that the more directly you focus on alignment, the less likely you are to achieve it. In one of our recent executive development seminars, a participant from a large manufacturing company illustrated this problem. He was very excited about the positive impact of alignment. At the end of the seminar, going out the door, he said, „I just can't wait to get back to work to get those turkeys aligned!"

Exhibit 1

The Unaligned vs. the Aligned Organization

Unaligned Organization

Current Reality

Aligned Organization

Current Reality

Vision
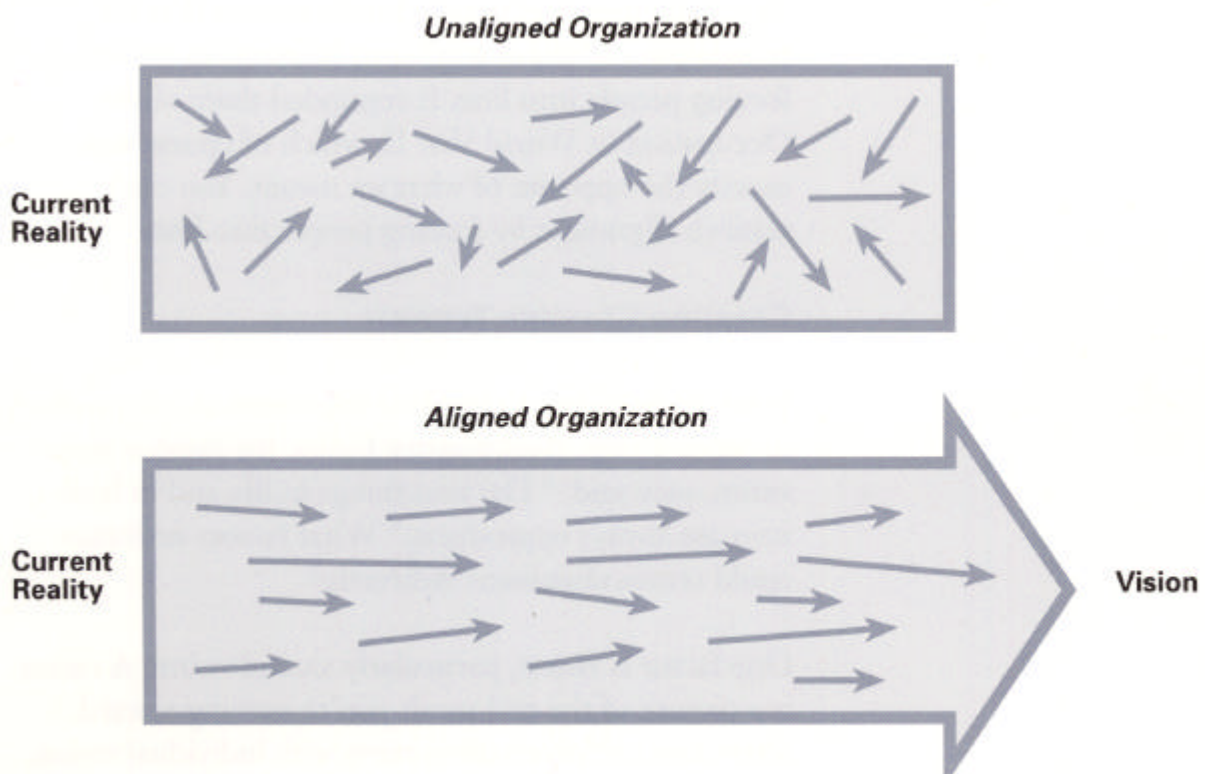
A similar misunderstanding arose when we delivered this material in Norway a few years ago. On the third day of the meeting, people finally told us that the translation of „alignment" into Norwegian meant forcing people into line. It reminded them of the Occupation in World War II, which of course was exactly the opposite of what we meant. You can't achieve alignment by forcing people into line.

Creating Creative Tension

It might be better to think of alignment as a byproduct of other things. Buckminster Fuller, the famous innovator, once said, „The best things in life and in business are always byproducts." What factors or forces could create alignment indirectly?

One factor is vision, particularly shared vision. A vision is a picture of the end result you're striving toward. Shared vision, which often starts with individual vision, can function like a magnetic force, aligning the efforts of people within the organization, particularly if they can see a connection between their personal vision and that larger, overarching vision. It's also very helpful if they feel they contributed to shaping that overarching vision.

Many people in senior roles think that a shared vision emerges when they go off by themselves, come up with a vision, and then call everyone together and share their vision in a speech or a presentation. Is that actually a shared vision? Not really. It could be a good start. But a true shared vision emerges only when each member of a team or organization has an opportunity to first come up with his or her own vision for life and work, then shares that vision with other members. Out of that experience the organization creates a shared vision, in which the leader's vision is very much a part, but not the only part. In other words, shared vision emerges ideally when we say, „This is my vision! What's your vision? And what's our shared vision?"

In addition to having a vision of where you're going, you need to know where you're starting from and what you have to work with – what we call „current reality." We refer to the gap between vision and current reality as creative tension. Tension always seeks resolution; this is a fundamental law of nature.

To establish the strong creative tension that drives effective action, there must be both vision and a solid grasp of current reality. Some people have vision and no grasp of current reality. These are the people who are always talking about starting a major new venture even though they can't manage a simple budget. Their visions lack credibility. On the other hand, some people are experts on current reality and have no vision; they tend to stay

stuck in one place for a very long time. They fail to harness their knowledge and understanding in a positive direction.

In the context of learning, the central role of leadership is to generate and manage creative tension. You do this first within yourself and then in successive circles widening out in the organization. Begin the process by imagining a vision that is very important to you personally. For example, you might envision a better relationship with one of your children or the successful completion of a project at work. Then look hard at the current reality. Now imagine that several months slip by in which you attempt to close the gap, but you're unsuccessful. How would that feel? You're likely to feel emotional tension as a byproduct of creative tension. That emotional tension could take the form of frustration, anxiety, even anger – negative emotional energy, which, of course, you want to get rid of before you get an ulcer.

What's the easiest way to get rid of emotional tension? You can do it in less than a minute. Just diminish your vision. Revise it so it's easier to attain – or abandon it altogether. However, when you relieve emotional tension, you also compromise creative tension. We call this the structure of compromise, or the structure of mediocrity. You could explain all the mediocrity in the world by this very simple dynamic: people don't understand the difference between creative tension and emotional tension, and so diminish their vision to relieve that tension.

Another way to relieve emotional tension is by denying current reality. People who take this approach walk around pretending things are fine when they're not. They might say, „We're living our vision today, everything's perfect, there are no problems." And then they step into a huge pit that they couldn't see because they're denying current reality.

To safeguard both their vision and their grasp of current reality, learning organizations need to develop two core capabilities: aspiration and truth. Instilling these capabilities – and practicing them – can be particularly challenging for senior managers. As people move up in rank, it becomes more and more difficult to hear about what's really going on. Typically, the information that gets passed up through the hierarchy is carefully filtered so that senior people hear only good news. Then people down the line wonder why senior managers make such poor decisions – when, after all, they have only incomplete or distorted information. In organizational politics, it is imperative to create an environment in which people feel safe putting the truth on the table and using it to fuel progress toward their vision.

Empowerment, Alignment, and Shared Vision

Empowerment is one of the buzzwords of the '90s. *Yet* most organizational empowerment efforts fall short of making any substantive impact. Why? We believe alignment is the key. Empowerment without alignment is dysfunctional. It doesn't help. In fact, it often exacerbates existing conflicts and counterproductive behaviors. Well-intentioned, committed people make escalating errors and become progressively more frustrated and disenfranchised. And then the leadership responds by stepping in and taking back the authority only recently delegated. If the only leverage you have is the granting or withholding of authority, it is nearly impossible to break out of that pendulum swing.

In contrast, a learning organization builds skills and capabilities in teams all through the organization, enabling them to create new forms of control that are more powerful and effective than centralized authority. In an organization that has shared vision, the capacity for acknowledging and exploring current reality, as well as other related learning disciplines, power and authority, can be readily decentralized in ways that actually improve performance and build alignment.

The Leader's Role

If your job as a leader is to generate and manage creative tension, you don't need to be perfect. In fact, just the opposite is true – to model learning and collaboration, you must learn to acknowledge gaps in your own knowledge and capability. One CEO we know stood up to make a presentation about the vision for the company, and in this vision were words about honesty, integrity, and those kinds of things. A bright young salesperson stood up at the end of the presentation and said, „Thank you very much, sir. I really appreciate much of what you've said here. I just thought you'd want to know that based on many of the policies of our company, we regularly lie to our customers." And the CEO said, „Well son, it's a tough business." Now, what do you think happened to motivation in the room after that statement? It dropped dramatically. The CEO missed a critical opportunity to reinforce understanding of and commitment to the vision.

In contrast, a CEO in a very similar role stood up, made a presentation, and again, a relatively junior-level person said, „Excuse me, sir, I don't mean to be impolite, but I haven't seen very much behavior on the part of you and the members of the senior team that lines up with the vision you have just described." The CEO smiled and said, „You're right. I got to be CEO by doing many things that are the opposite of what I've just said. And that's how I was successful – walking through brick walls, doing unusual things to get to the top. But I realize that these new tools of a learning organization and our vision are the way of the future. You'll spend most of your lives

working with these ideas. I'm late in my career. It's very difficult for me to learn. But I'm committed to learning, and I need your help. Please don't embarrass me, but when I'm not living up to those behaviors, take me aside and tell me, and I'll do my best to change. I can't do it alone."

As a result of that and similar comments, the energy and motivation in that organization went up dramatically. Why? The leader was acknowledging a gap. He was saying, „I'm part of this creative tension, as well as you." As a leader, you must have your own vision, acknowledge the gaps between your vision and current reality, and take steps to close them. In short, you need to be a model for the process of working with creative tension.

The first step is to identify the things that are most meaningful to you and your team and start living them. Then watch for opportunities to involve other people as well. Use training and other tools to help people develop their own vision and improve their real learning capability throughout the organization.

Pull the Curve Forward

To achieve alignment with a shared vision, we don't recommend pursuing the whole organization at once – an approach we sometimes call the „sheep dip" approach to organizational change. (The term comes from sheep farmers' practice of dipping sheep in a vat to kill bugs and fleas. The sheep don't like the process much, but it works.) The organizational equivalent is to fill a vat up with the „liquid" – representing, for example, total quality management or the learning organization – and dip the whole organization in the vat. (Generally the senior team is not part of the dipping. They're the dippers. This is a problem in itself.) This approach is not an appropriate way to bring about change. It doesn't use energy very effectively, and you risk turning off your best people. The misunderstanding here is to think of the organization as a single entity.

We like to think of an organization not as an undifferentiated mass, but as having a normal distribution on a curve (Exhibit 2). On the front end of that curve is a small group of people – it could be 5 or 10 percent – who are what we call „make-it-happen" people. In total quality management, for example, these are the people who jump in and made the tools work. Then you've got a larger group of „supportive" people who will team up with the make-it-happen people and make the change successful. Then there is a larger group behind them of „let-it-happen" people; they'll let it go forward, let it work, which often is just fine. There's also a small group who will oppose change, and you need to listen to their concerns and send any problems over to the make-it-happen people to solve.

A key principle is to work first with the positive energy of the „early adopters." Choose parts of the organization in which you need work done, where you've already got a group of committed people, and then use their positive experience to pull the curve forward. Eventually you will involve the whole organization.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, „Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, nothing else ever has." Ultimately, that is your challenge as a leader: to provoke and provide the energy, caring, and commitment that can pull your organization toward inspired performance.

Exhibit 2

Typical Distribution of Responses to Change
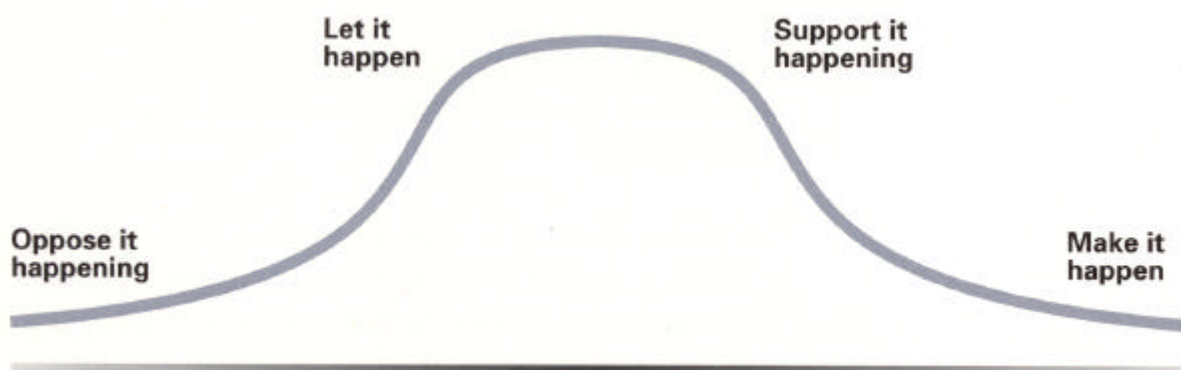
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