



THE WILKINS GROUP

Tool Kit

Providing Tools for
Productive Workplaces

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HOW LEARNING
ORGANIZATIONS
WORK

COMMUNITIES OF
PRACTICE —
A LOW-COST
ALTERNATIVE TO
FORMAL TRAINING

*“Lifelong
learning takes
us on a deep
developmental
path.”*

Sheila Scanlon Wilkins

What is a learning organization and how does it work?

By Sheila Scanlon Wilkins

Extraordinary changes, going beyond the advances of new technologies, are occurring in the business world. Witness the unprecedented evolution of the global workforce.

Cutting edge technological changes are spilling over into every day life. New types of energy and communication grids are contributing to the reshaping of our organizational structures.

We could ask ourselves, “What do I want to do with the rest of my organizational life? Do I want to spend it coping with politics and other organizational diseases, or do I want to spend it working on building a great organization?”

In learning organizations people continually expand their capacity to create the results they want. People encourage new and expansive ways of thinking and continually learn how to learn together.

Most of us have been a member of a great team at one time or another. Maybe it was a sports team, a performing arts team, or even a work team. We remember the team because of the trust, the relationships, the synergy and the results we achieved.

If we remember correctly, we didn't start out as a great team. We started out as a group of individuals. It took time for us to learn how to work together as a whole and produce incredible results.

GREAT TEAMS ARE LIKE LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS — GROUPS OF PEOPLE, WHO, OVER TIME, ENHANCE THEIR CAPACITY TO CREATE WHAT THEY REALLY WANT TO CREATE.

As teams develop, there is a steep learning curve that often changes people, sometimes profoundly. Team members learn new

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Smaller world... universal challenges

The world is indeed becoming a smaller place and easier to access with technology tools.

I recently returned from the International Federation of Training and Development Organization's world conference in Brazil. I presented a paper this year on managing organizational change at the personal level.



While the culture in Brazil is different from ours, managing organizational change is a challenge for them as well as for us.

The increasing pace of change will keep us on the tips of our toes. How do we keep ourselves current in the always-evolving workplace? How do we provide learning opportunities for our organizations' members?

This issue describes what a learning organization looks like and how organizations can embrace life long learning. I am delighted to introduce a long-time colleague of mine, Carol Haig, of Carol Haig & Associates, who discusses a low cost alternative to formal training — a Community of Practice. ❖

A Low Cost Alternative to Formal Training

By Carol Haig
Carol Haig & Associates

As the U.S. economy rocks and rolls, organizations are challenged to cut unnecessary expenditures, reduce operational costs and otherwise engage in belt-tightening. Most look first at staff functions to reduce expenses or eliminate services. Frequently, training is an early casualty.

What can an organization do, then, when employees must acquire new skills and knowledge and formal training is not available? One solution is to identify an existing Community of Practice and build a formal foundation so it can flourish.

A Community of Practice is a group of individuals that comes together to share ideas and information, create something new or build skills. Like a professional organization, a Community of Practice fosters networking, personal and professional growth, mentoring of newer members and a collegial atmosphere - all without membership dues.

Most organizations have a number of Communities of Practice already functioning as conduits of information and expertise. Typically, they develop wherever employees share a common work experience - which is in almost every work group or professional discipline.

Communities of Practice might exist among Java programmers around the



world, tractor repair specialists in one division of a company or ocean marine insurance underwriters nationwide. Others might develop around a workspace planning project, call center service initiative or job sharing program.

A Community of Practice is a flexible entity and can exist within a close-knit group, or can be one that spans the globe. Members can share ideas face-to-face or electronically.

With a nominal investment in time and people, and with management's support, these groups can be formalized and given the responsibility for building specific skills and knowledge among their members. Some situations where Communities of Practice are particularly successful include:

- Rapid skill development in a new discipline.

- Best practices exchanges.
- Team learning and mentoring.

Your organization is likely to have the foundation in place for your own Community of Practice. You can use it to build skills and knowledge in place of a formal training process or to augment what is already in place. Ask us to help you build your own Community of Practice. ❖

Carol Haig leads Carol Haig & Associates, a consulting firm in California. She uses her 25 years of HPT experience to help companies align their work, their workers and their workplaces to improve employee performance. She has a strong interest in Communities of Practice as a practical solution to learning in organizations.

Carol is a past Director of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). She holds both a B.S. and M.S. in Secondary English Education. Contact Carol at: Carol Haig & Associates, 1426 Cortez Court, Walnut Creek, CA 94598, (925) 934-5338, or at carolhaig@earthlink.net.

What is a learning organization?

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skills and capabilities that alter their understanding and what they do.

New awareness develops along with new capabilities. Over time, people see and experience the world differently; they begin to form new beliefs and assumptions, which enable greater skills and capabilities development.

The steep learning curve characterizes the essence of a learning organization — the development of new capabilities and fundamental shifts of mind. Lifelong learning takes us on a never-ending developmental path.

THERE ARE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS REQUIRED TO CREATE A LEARNING ORGANIZATION.

- Distribute power while increasing self-discipline
- Develop systems thinking skills
- Improve conversations/communication

- Establish voluntary followership
- In well-managed organizations, people are encouraged to look beyond their own organizational life for ideas and support. Leaders actively seek to learn about others' efforts, results, and ideas.

People who use this approach are not just talking about the learning organization; they are using it as a springboard for experiments and initiatives. With each exchange effort, they create a new facet for their vision of what their learning organization can be.

Your organization mostly likely has the foundation in place for a learning organization. You can use this foundation to expand your thinking, create new ways of doing work, and to develop yourself personally as well as organizationally.

Ask us to help you expand your learning organization. ❖



THE WILKINS GROUP

Consulting and Training

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2182 Gill Port Lane
Walnut Creek, CA 94598

925-937-6055; Fax: 925-939-2950

Email: Sheila@WilkinsGroup.com