

## Becoming a Learning Organization

The idea of being a learning organization is attractive because of the connotation that the organization is constantly becoming more competitive, savvy, and expert. But what exactly does being a learning organization entail? This resource is intended to give you **a way of thinking about becoming a learning organization, specifically by creating (or re-inventing already existing) organizational routines to employ small cycles of continuous improvement towards delivering high quality instruction**. The term “Learning Organization” was popularized by Peter Senge in his 1990 book, *The Fifth Discipline*<sup>1</sup>, but the idea is not a new one, and it can take many forms, including the ones contained in the following books:

- *Toyota Kata*<sup>2</sup> documents and explains the system of coaching and experimentation that Toyota uses daily to constantly improve quality;
- *Learning to Improve*<sup>3</sup> advocates that the implementation of improvement cycles should occur in teams that share ideas and data;
- *Introduction to Action Research*<sup>4</sup> provides a model for experimenting on one’s own practice;
- *Red Team*<sup>5</sup> describes how organizations improve by systematically seeking out their weaknesses via routines designed for that purpose;
- *Unmistakable Impact*<sup>6</sup> describes how coaching can support continuous improvement.

An organization does not have a brain, so how can it be said to learn? Obviously, the learning is done by members of the organization, but the policies and practices that the organization adopts have a large influence on the growth of the individuals who comprise the organization. The organization learns according to how it structures the learning of its members. What all the models listed above have in common is that the organization takes a stance on supporting learning by doing as a part of the organization’s culture—the beliefs about what brings about success and the resulting behaviors. In other words, the organization:

1. Creates policies and procedures that result in the performance of regular routines aimed at continuous improvement;
2. Communicates belief in learning by doing as a way for individuals to improve and also for the organization as a whole to improve (thereby becoming a learning organization);
3. Lowers barriers to experimentation, by expressing appreciation for individuals and teams who are trying something new, making it clear that no one will be evaluated negatively when an experiment fails, and explicitly valuing failure because data about what doesn’t work are essential to finding what does work;

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, P. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

<sup>2</sup> Rother, M. (2010). *Toyota Kata: Managing people for continuous improvement and superior results*. McGraw-Hill.

<sup>3</sup> Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America’s schools can get better at getting better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

<sup>4</sup> Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (2006). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change*. SAGE publications.

<sup>5</sup> Zenko, M. (2015). *Red team: How to succeed by thinking like the enemy*. Basic Books.

<sup>6</sup> Knight, J. (2010). *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- 4. Collects data not just about outcomes (lagging indicators) but also about how well the processes are working to improve those outcomes (leading indicators), and using those data to improve the routines for continuous improvement.

On the next page, we provide a set of guidelines, or a scaffold, that leaders and coaches can employ to engage educators in organizational learning through small cycles of continuous improvement. The big idea here is that all organizations employ routines, and these routines can be harnessed to embed small cycles of continuous improvement into the daily life of the organization. By small, we mean frequent and involving small changes, so that the risk is low and barriers to participation are minimized. We also suggest that the process be collaborative, so that data from experiments can be shared and the learning leads to a shared understanding of whatever the focus of the continuous improvement cycle might be.

## A Scaffold for Organizational Learning

All organizations employ routines to accomplish their work. For example, schools hold staff meetings, grade level meetings, and data team meetings. These routines are regularly occurring; predictable; utilize norms, tools and protocols; and are embedded in the organizational culture (“this is the way we do business because this is what it takes to be successful”). **Employing the scaffold described below frequently and with a shared understanding of vision and mission allows a routine to become an active generator of organizational learning—then it becomes a learning-focused routine.** A

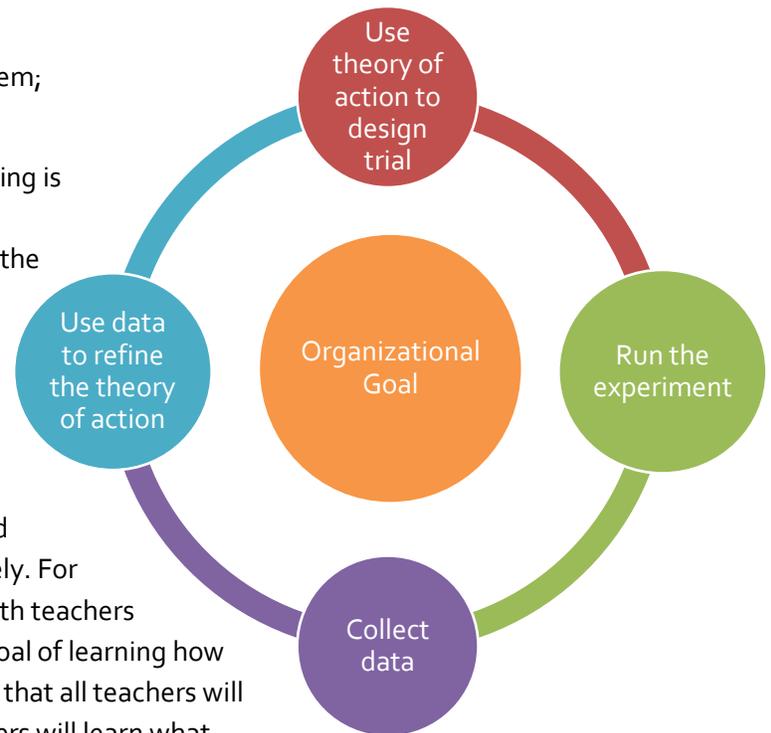
learning-focused routine will have all the features of a regular routine PLUS it must:

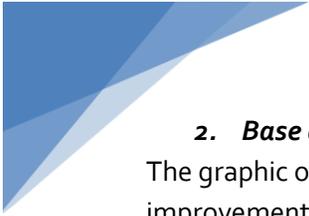
- Build shared understanding of high-quality instruction;
- Build capacity of participants to enact/support high quality instruction through participating in the routine;
- Collect data about strategy implementation;
- Employ data as feedback to improve the system;
- Reduce variation in practice.

Starting from the premise that organizational learning is largely an outcome of small cycles of continuous improvement, the following suggestions represent the “best of” the models listed on the previous page:

### 1. **Choose learning goals rather than performance goals**

Setting numerical targets helps only if people already know how to meet the target. If you are expecting people to innovate, then set goals around learning how to implement the innovation effectively. For example, instead of making a goal that 100% of math teachers will use Khan Academy in their classes, adopt the goal of learning how to make good use of the resource. Instead of a goal that all teachers will use cooperative learning, make the goal that teachers will learn what lessons in a unit are best accomplished through use of cooperative learning strategies.





## **2. Base adult learning on a cycle of inquiry**

The graphic on page 2 is a visual template for a cycle of inquiry or a cycle of continuous improvement. Think of this as the script for your routines, whether they are coaching, data teams, etc. For example, a high school social studies department may be charged with working towards a district goal of increasing students' cognitive engagement (organizational goal); they agree that giving students more responsibility for investigating a historical event could be one way of doing that (theory of action). So then they agree to try a question formulation protocol in all of their classes (run the experiment) and to collect some feedback from students at the end of the lesson about whether deciding what questions they want to find answers to was more engaging (collect data). They come back together the following week to pool the data, tweak the theory of action, and decide what to try next.

## **3. Make the cycles of improvement small and frequent**

*Toyota Kata* advocates daily cycles. While this may not be possible, make them weekly at the most, so that the experiments are small (and therefore easier to attempt and not so high stakes) and the rate of change is rapid. It is much easier to make many small advances than to try and change something big all at once. Improvement is a habit, not an event.

## **4. Learn in collaborative teams**

If everyone in the organization is working on different goals, then what they learn may or may not help anyone else, and if they try something that doesn't work then they may be tempted to dismiss the intervention in question (for example, "I tried that and it didn't work"). If everyone is working on a common goal, then they can pool their data, giving them more to work from and making it easier to figure out the conditions under which an intervention can be successful (for example, "Oh, you did it that way? I didn't think of that. Maybe that's why it didn't work so well for me. Let me try it the way you did it").

## **5. Track learning in real time**

If you leave capturing the learning until late in the game, then responses to the question "what have you learned?" tend to be very general, along the lines of, for example, "I learned that I can be flexible," "I learned that technology is not as difficult as I thought," or "I learned that I work with a great team." You are much more likely to elicit details that will be useful later on if you ask people to record their learning as it happens, perhaps through taking notes at team meetings or asking people to keep a journal. It doesn't have to be formal, or in a particular format, and it's important not to turn it into a compliance activity or hold everyone accountable—it's a learning tool, not a checklist item.

## **6. Make it safe to fail**

Failure affords the greatest potential for learning. At the same time, if people feel that they are being negatively appraised when their efforts aren't immediately successful, we should not be surprised if they choose not to put themselves in a vulnerable position—if I think that I might be putting myself at risk of embarrassment or judgment by trying something, I might rather not do it at all. So we have to focus on the process rather than the outcome, because it is improving the process that will lead to improving the outcome. We have to go from saying, "Don't worry, we all make mistakes," to "This probably won't work the first time we try it but let's see how much we can learn," and "Let's see what it takes to make this work."