

## Building a Learning Organization

You may have heard the term “learning organization” more often in recent years, as the concept has gained in popularity. But what exactly is a learning organization? What are the reasons for building one? And how would you go about it?

### **What Is a Learning Organization?**

A learning organization is one that constantly provides its employees timely access to relevant, practical information that can empower them to improve both individual and organizational performance. It involves creating a culture where learning is embedded and it is communicated to and understood by all that there is a place to seek information. Examples might include online forums or processes for easy transfer of job knowledge when workers leave or retire.

Peter Senge describes a learning organization as one in which you cannot NOT learn because learning is so insinuated into the fabric of life. David Garvin defines a learning organization as an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. According to Mike Pedler, this “can only happen as a result of learning at the whole organization level.”

### **Reasons for Building a Learning Organization**

Adopting a sustained culture of learning enables an organization to maintain a competitive advantage in times of change and to inspire its workforce to achieve greater results and improved quality. An organization can also draw on a learning culture to encourage innovation or manage change.

### **How to Build a Learning Organization**

The key components of building a learning organization include:

1. Conducting an organizational assessment, with particular focus on culture, leadership, and the organization's tolerance for change.
2. Creating a strategic plan to both frame the gap between where it is now and where it wants to be and to guide decision making throughout implementation and into the future; making sure that this plan is aligned with the organization's mission, vision, and values.
3. Documenting knowledge through job audits or other collection methods.
4. Designing standard operating procedures and work instructions to make knowledge portable.
5. Aligning performance and training initiatives so that each worker can improve skills and knowledge and contribute more fully to the organization.
6. Implementing supporting technology for easy access and future changes.
7. Continuously evaluating progress toward strategic objectives.

Building a learning organization requires consistent and ongoing change management and communication strategies before, during, and after implementation. To learn more about learning organization theories and implementation, read *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter Senge or *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* by Senge et al.