THE PUBLIC SERVICE AS A LEARNING ORGANISATION

C. Thornhill
H.G. van Dijk
School of Public Management and Administration
University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT

The Public Service as a learning organisation is high on government's agenda as a way of promoting effectiveness and efficiency. This article suggests that the learning organisation is an aim worth striving for, keeping in mind that adapting to the ever-changing environment would mean that the aim would never be fully achieved. The learning organisation is built on specific blocks that affect and impact on the learning culture of the organisation. The building blocks have to be in place before an organisation could characterise itself as a learning organisation. Implementing the building blocks are a challenge for human resource management in the Public Service. The important factors contributing to the management of a successful learning organisation, namely leadership and strategic intent are discussed and the various challenges managers have to be aware of in the implementation of the learning organisation, are highlighted. Lastly, how the Public Service can become a learning organisation and its receptivity to the concept, are described.

INTRODUCTION

It is trite to say that the Public Service is faced with numerous challenges. However, it is simultaneously necessary to note and reconsider the nature of the challenges, their effects on human resources and possible ways of addressing the challenges to ensure continuous high quality service delivery.

In this article the attention is devoted to only one possible approach that could be utilised to address the challenges. It is not a comprehensive description or evaluation of the learning organisation as a managerial mechanism, but merely the theoretical underpinnings of the approach.

DEFINING THE CONCEPT

The concept: *learning organisation* has undergone various permutations. In some cases it was used interchangeably with organisational learning (Stewart, 2001). The latter, however, focuses mainly on increasing the organisational problem-solving capacity of an institution and changing the behaviour of employees that would lead to improved performance by individuals and teams at all organisational levels (*Loc.cit.*).

The learning organisation is an organisation where " ... people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire; new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured; collective aspirations are set free; people are continually learning to learn together (Senge, 1990, quoted by Stewart, 2001). It should be emphasised that no organisation is a learning organisation. Senge states it quite clearly in his ground breaking *Fifth discipline* that an organisation does not *arrive*. It merely strives towards the ideal of being a learning organisation (Senge, 1990:11).

To be able to fully understand what a learning organisation entails, attention should be paid to what *learning* implies. Learning is not an objective, measurable concept that can be operationalised scientifically (Stewart, 2001). According to Yeo (2002) two approaches to learning could be identified *viz.*

- behavioural learning
- cognitive learning

Behavioural learning refers to coping with existing organisational routines or rules; with the change occurring in individuals; with changes in structures, goals and aspirations. Cognitive learning concerns generative learning; focusing on thinking processes; with emotional responses; and based on qualitative research.

The learning organisation has to do with behavioural learning (Yeo, 2002). It concerns a complex process involving skills, such as mental mapping, intuition and imagination and problem solving ability. Thus, should the Public Service be intent on creating a learning organisation, attention should be devoted to the development of a learning culture. Thereafter a learning organisation could ultimately be developed.

Learning is an emotional process (Kline & Saunders, 1993:16-17). The organisational culture provides the support for learning. Managers should strive to ensure that as much as possible transfer of knowledge and power take place from person to person. Employees as learners should be required to structure their own learning rather than to depend on learning opportunities structured for them.

Garratt has made a valuable contribution to the explanation of the place of and need for learning in the process of change i.e.

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This implies that the rate of learning must be equal to or greater than the state of change in the environment for any organism to survive (Shukla, 1997). Thus, it should be obvious that change and learning are inextricably linked. Change can only take place in a sensible manner if learning occurs. However, the rate of learning should be equal to or greater than the rate of change.

Learning is the most natural of activities. It is an essential part of human experience and something that individuals do throughout their lives (Garvin, 2000). Therefore, this characteristic should be considered as an inherent component of any institution's operations. Learning should not be seen as a necessary but unproductive evil by managers (*Loc.cit.*). It should be viewed as a process that develops over time. The knowledge gained through learning should be shared collectively and translated into new ways of behaving.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Establishing a learning organisation depends on creating a learning culture. A learning culture does not mean sending employees on as many training courses as possible without evaluating the outcomes of these courses but rather identifying on a continuous basis those training courses that would satisfy both individual and organisational development needs. A learning culture should support learning and be based on ensuring the free exchange and flow of information to put expertise where it is most needed and encouraging individuals to network extensively across organisational boundaries in order to develop their own knowledge and expertise as well as supporting the commitment to learning and personal development where learning is rewarded and encouraged. The learning culture will be characterised by creativity, diversity and a climate of openness and trust. The learning culture supposes that learning from mistakes can often be more rewarding and instructional, than learning from success (Farago & Skyrme 1995:2).

The most basic building block for a learning organisation is its commitment to individual employee learning. Senge (1990:140) maintains that a manager's fundamental task no longer lies in planning, organising and controlling but in providing the enabling condition for an employee to lead the most enriching life he or she can. Senge (1990:6-11) proposes five disciplines that underwrite the building blocks for a learning organisation. The five disciplines are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking.

The phrase 'personal mastery' is used to describe the discipline for personal growth and learning. Employees with high levels of personal mastery continuously expand their ability to create the results in life that they truly seek. Their quest for continuous learning is the basic spirit for the learning organisation. Personal mastery goes beyond mere com-

petence and skill although it is grounded in achieving competence and obtaining appropriate skills. Being a personal master in your current position means that you approach your position from a creative point of view and not from a reactive viewpoint. Personal mastery embodies two underlying movements including to continually clarify what is important and to continually learn how to see the current reality more clearly. The gap between the vision of what the employee wants to achieve' and the realities of the current position should generate a creative tension – the force'to bring them together. The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain the creative tension in the day-to-day functions of employees (Senge 1990:140-142).

Mental models, according to Senge (1990:8-9) are the deeply ingrained assumptions and generalisations that influence the way in which employees will understand and take action. The mental models focus on turning the attention inward, to the development of the self and realising what can be learned from others, without making assumptions on who these persons are. Senge (1990:174) maintains that new insights are not implemented because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the organisation works. These images limit the way employees think and act and the managing of mental models would then imply surfacing, testing and improving internal images of how an organisation functions. Developing employee capacity to work with mental models involves learning new skills and implementing organisational innovations that will help bring the new skills into regular practice. The purpose of the mental models is to ensure that managers focus on them in order to ensure that the prevailing assumptions are brought out into the open, challenges and changed through a process of systems thinking (to be discussed shortly). Hodgkinson (2000:5) stipulates that establishing new mental models in an ever-changing environment will not be an easy task to accomplish, but that the first step towards it should be for all employees to acknowledge their mental preconceptions and learn to deal with them.

A shared vision creates a sense of commonality that penetrates the whole organisation and provides a sense of cohesiveness to all diverse activities and employees. When employees truly share a vision, they are bound by it, developing a common goal and aspire to achieve it. The shared vision is crucial to organisational learning because it provides focus and energy for learning. It could be argued that through shared vision employees will strive to learn because learning a new skill becomes part of their vision and is, thus, important to them. A shared vision is a vision to which employees are committed, because it also reflects their own personal vision (Senge 1990: 205-206). A shared vision would be hard to identify because employees might have their own personal agendas. It could manifest itself as a power struggle or a clash of egos, but hierarchical pressures for the effective and efficient delivery of services might not allow much time for identifying values that would guarantee a shared vision (Hodgkinson 2000:6).

Team learning invests in the potential wisdom of teams. An unaligned team is wasted energy and even though individual employees may work very hard, their collective effort

does not translate into an efficient and effective group effort. The more a team becomes aligned in their performance, the more they will complement one another's efforts. Senge (1990:233-236) maintains that aligning the team becomes a prerequisite for empowering the individual that will empower the team. Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of the team in order to ensure organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Teams build on the shared vision principle. Focusing on team learning proposes that individual learning is not enough to ensure organisational learning. Individual learning has proven not to be responsive to organisational training priorities and thus focusing on the team accomplishments set the tone for and establish the standards of learning for the whole organisation.

Only when team functioning characterises an organisation, can team learning be propagated, but in a hierarchical structure, placing emphasis on the importance of the individual position in the realisation of organisational effectiveness and efficiency will provide the basis for instilling a learning culture. Hodgkinson (2000:6) stated that team learning could be achieved through an attitude of give and take and that sharing visions for the team would co-ordinate the team effort efficiently. Team learning is also significant for individuals who could show personal mastery and talented team members should be used to develop others. However, a lack of organisational support in terms of counselling and mentoring could hinder team learning. Personal or individual challenges to team learning deals with managers not being able to deal with staff from different levels in the hierarchy, managers losing power and control positions and managers having to take the responsibility for allowing employees to develop themselves.

The fifth discipline is entitled systems thinking, which is based on utilising the way of thinking about a language for describing and understanding the relationships that shape the behaviour of systems (Frydman *et al.* 2000:4-5). *'Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes'* (Senge 1990:68). It is necessary to devote some time to systems thinking as the development of a learning organisation depends on the ability to consider all components and all the actions of an organisation simultaneously i.e. to think about the system in its totality. In fact the justification for Peter Senge's fifth discipline is systems thinking, i.e. a developmental path for acquiring particular skills or competencies (Senge, 1990:10). The discipline of systems thinking is linked to the other four disciplines of personal mastery; mental models; building shared vision; and team learning as identified by Senge.

Systems thinking is governed by various laws according to Senge (1990:57-67) i.e.

- today's problems come from yesterday's solutions;
- the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back;
- behaviour grows better before it grows worse;
- the easy way out usually leads back in;
- the cure can be worse than the disease;

- faster most often is slower;
- cause and effect are not closely related in time and space;
- small changes can produce big results, but areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious;
- you can have your cake and eat it, but not at once;
- dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants; and
- there is no blame.

Although the issues need not be pursued at length, it is necessary to emphasise that systems thinking lies at the base of the learning organisation. It requires of managers not to be overwhelmed by complexity; to ensure that the information created can be absorbed; that relationships are considered rather than cause-effect chains; that processes of change are acknowledged rather than to consider mere snapshots of events.

MANAGING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

The traditional approach in organisational change was to commence with stating a vision, followed by a mission statement. This was supposed to result in a behavioural change, which led to action followed by a new organisational culture. Ho (1999) argues that the contemporary approach should commence with action followed by behavioural change, which will then result in a new vision. This is followed by a mission statement after which a new organisational culture is developed. Change is thus introduced by way of action. Considering this new approach it is clear that problems (or challenges) should be treated where it has arisen. Regular adaptations should thus be introduced instead of singular major changes far apart.

The need to learn to cope with change can be traced to the 1960s as a result of the growing awareness that an organisation is not an impersonal mechanical system. It was realised that an organisation or rather an institution consists of people whose perceptions, experiences, thinking and judgment play a critical role in its functioning and in achieving effectiveness (Shukla, 1997). To some extent this notion of learning could be traced to the writings of Argyris concerning the role of learning in facilitating change.

Leadership and the learning organisation

The learning organisation does not simply *happen*. Particular preconditions have to be met to develop such an approach. One such prerequisite is the presence of a promoter i.e. a leader to introduce and drive the process. In actual fact Senge argues that the learning organisation requires a new view of leadership (1990:339). It should centre on subtler, more important tasks. The leader should act as the designer, the steward and the teacher. Therefore, leadership cannot be ignored in the endeavours to create a learning

organisation. Thus managers are required to improve their leadership styles (Mahoney, 2000).

Leaders determine what kind of behaviour by their subordinates would be acceptable. Therefore, they have to set the scene that would favour learning to take place within a systems context. In this regard public sector leaders should bear in mind that change in the public sector is not directly economically motivated as in the private sector. Alternative motivational considerations such as improved service delivery and commitment to community service should be developed.

A leader practices influencing and leadership refers to the leading, directing, actuating and motivating of subordinates (Sisk & Williams 1981:7). Nigro & Nigro (1989:211) state that the basis of leadership is that it is an action aimed at influencing the actions of others. Thus, leadership cannot be taught, but it is inherent in the characteristics of a person. Effective leadership skills can, however, be taught to managers. Leadership also influences the way in which employees perceive the work situation. Employees would like to be challenged because employment is the tool to empower the employee in order to pursue more desirable activities during his or her time at an organisation.

Chung (1987:359) best describes the difference between a leader and a manager. A leader has followers, a leader has emotional appeal and a leader meets the needs of his or her followers. Managers have to supervise and subordinates have to follow the directive of the manager, whether it appeals to them or not. Leaders are expected to be charismatic, while managers are expected to make rational decisions. Most importantly, a leader is chosen and a manager is appointed. Thus, leaders carry the interest of their followers first while, managers are expected to place an organisation's attainment of goals and objectives first. Managers are concerned with the wellbeing of their employees, but the strategic link does not begin with the employee and end with management, but rather, it is usually the other way around.

Individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealised influence are types of transformational leadership styles. Transformation leadership is defined as creating a heightened awareness of the key issues impacting on employee development and influencing achievement, growth and development. Transformational leadership stimulates interest among employees to view their work from a new perspective, to generate an awareness of the vision and mission of an organisation, to develop employees to achieve their potential and to motivate employees to transcend their self-interest so as to benefit an organisation as a whole (Coad & Berry 1998:3).

Managers provide employees with personal attention through individualised consideration. A trust relationship is built, focusing on employee needs. The manager provides challenging work assignments to boost the confidence and skills of employees. Intellectual stimulation supposes that managers will encourage their employees to use

their imagination and to re-think ways of doing things. The manager generates the flow of ideas, questions assumptions and encourages employees to come up with their own structures and solutions to problems (Coad & Berry 1998:3).

Creating a clear picture that the future is both optimistic and attainable is the responsibility of the inspirational motivator. Managers will set high expectations and communicate a vision to employees in simple language. Employees react willingly and increase their effort to achieve the vision. Managers who are role models for employees are idealised as influence leaders. Managers will show great persistence and determination in achieving organisational objectives and goals, they will reinforce high standards of ethical conduct and share their success with their employees. Managers are thus admired, respected and trusted. Employees wish to emulate them and follow them without any prejudice (Coad & Berry 1998:3).

Armstrong (1990:170-171) identified the primary and accessory leadership roles of the manager. The primary leadership roles of the manager are as a visionary, an executive, a planner, a policy-maker, a controller and a provider of rewards and punishments. The accessory functions are functions assigned to the manager because of the leadership position vested in a management position. The manager acting as role model, symbol of group unity, object for identification and, sometimes, target for aggression when employees are frustrated disappointed and disillusioned, are all examples of the accessory leadership roles ascribed to managers. The leadership roles assumed by managers will vary according to the task at hand. For the management of the learning organisation the manager will, for instance, need to be a visionary, an expert, a role model and a symbol uniting his or her employees and guiding them through the changing learning environment.

Team and organisational development are integral parts of establishing a learning organisation and include the use of facilitators to help groups with work, job and organisation design and team development by reinforcing values, developing a vision and creating an organisational culture based on a climate of cohesiveness, sharing, support and stretching goals (Farago & Skyrme 1995:3).

Strategic thinking

It may seem as though the issue is pursued at length. However, it should be emphasised that members of an organisation have to develop an understanding of the organisation as a whole. The organisation should not be considered in terms of structures, processes and behaviour (Stewart, 2001). In this regard the development of a learning organisation does not depend on individuals. Teams are the fundamental units for the development of a learning organisation. Stewart even argues that it is a social system (*Loc.cit.*).

Planning is the process of determining the future course of action. In terms of the learning organisation, strategic planning would imply determining the extent to which the organisation and its senior management is able to formulate training goals and priorities as well as the ability to describe the way in which the goals and priorities are to be achieved. Strategic planning should be based on encouraging assumptions and thinking that require management to consider innovative and creative solutions to problems Farago & Skyrme 1995:3). Shukla (1997:249) calls it creating the strategic intent to learn. The manager of the learning organisation is able to visibly and formally communicate his or her commitment to learning to their subordinates. The ability to promote visionary skills should stimulate strategic planning. Two ways can be identified to promote the creation of new knowledge in the organisation including articulating high, seemingly impossible goals to stimulate employees to review their assumptions about work and redesign their tasks and functions. The discrepancy between the present and desired levels of performance should be magnified in order to provide direction to the problem-solving efforts of the organisation. Vision building exercises stimulate an organisation-wide process of reflection, discussion and questioning resulting in the organisation being able to redefine its operating processes (Shukla 1997:250-253).

The creation and implementation of a learning organisation should be a goal not only important to senior management, but also to all levels of the hierarchy in an organisation. Involvement, commitment and participation are key concepts for the successful implementation of the learning organisation and can be facilitated through appropriate strategic thinking and planning.

The learning organisation aims at improving its ability for learning. It makes use of the learning of all employees, thus creating a work environment that stimulates and supports learning. The development of a learning organisation requires the bringing together of employees within an institution and to develop a shared culture. Homogeneity and a large measure of conformity should be developed before the organisation could become a truly learning organisation.

The South African Public Service has experienced intensive re-organisation since 1994. New organisations have been established; a new relationship had to develop amongst the three spheres of government; new labour legislation had to be introduced; and a large number of new employees entered the Public Service from the private sector, the non-governmental sector and even with training in foreign countries. Therefore, a new culture had to be developed before attempts could be made to establish effective and efficient public sector institutions.

It is imperative to eliminate possible factors that could inhibit the development of the Public Service as a learning organisation *inter alia* (Wallace, 1997, quoted in Smith & Taylor, 2000)

- traditions of non participating policy-making
- expectations that officials should merely act and not learn
- presence of fragmented structures of thought
- accountability that does not favour mistakes thus inhibiting initiative
- ambiguity of purposes
- absence of rewards for risk-taking
- task obsession and short termism
- career expectations and role structures.

It is obvious that the Public Service is not required to simply manage change. Managers and all other employees should focus on eradicating the inhibiting factors. The aim should be to anticipate changing needs, changing environments, changing policy imperatives and to inculcate a behavioural pattern that could accommodate change. The Public Service should identify clearly delineated processes to build a learning organisation. Employees should not be seen as passive extensions of the production line machinery. They should all become thinkers and problem-solvers whose creative ability is the major factor in determining their usefulness (Kline & Saunders, 1993).

CHALLENGES FACING THE CREATION OF A LEARNING ORGANISATION

Garratt (1990:78-80) identified specific conditions that would facilitate organisational learning, including creating the perception that learning is a cyclical process – where one aspect of learning would affect the success of another. The free flow of information is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a learning organisation as well as the ability of managers to value employees as the key assets for organisational learning. Managers need to understand that a new approach to training and development (the creation of a learning organisation) will not be implemented without challenges. Specific challenges deal, for instance, with the lack of strategic awareness on the part of managers as well as a lack of personal development processes.

Operational preoccupation

Farago & Skyrme (1995: 3) maintain that not creating time to sit back and think strategically will only hinder the successful management of a learning organisation. Strategic thinking can be a powerful tool in ensuring human resource development and training because strategic thinking will ensure the creation of the important link between human resource development (individual employee effectiveness and efficiency) and organisational development (organisational effectiveness and efficiency).

Garratt (1990:XV) maintains that managers lack awareness in terms of their own strategic leadership roles in the creation of a learning organisation. Day-to-day functioning prevents managers from being able to sit back and strategically think about the organisation's positioning and how to improve and adapt to the ever changing external environment. No learning system is able to keep up with the changes taking place in the external environment and thus no organisation can ever, in the true sense of the concept, become a learning organisation.

Hierarchical thinking

The tendency to focus too much on systems and processes to the exclusion of other factors, inhibits the management of a learning organisation (Farago & Skyrme 1995:3-4). The challenge is evident when an organisational structure is too hierarchical and the free flow of information is not promoted. Employees hold on to their positions and status, because they do not understand the larger role that they play within the overall organisation. Their territory has to be protected, and innovation or development might just harm their *status quo.*

Reluctance to train

The reluctance to train or invest in training is a great challenge for public managers to overcome (Farago & Skyrme 1995:4). The reason for not investing in training could be due to personal fears or prejudice but it does hamper the successful implementation and management of a learning organisation. Garratt (1990:XV) identifies the lack of a personal development plan as a stumbling block to the successful implementation of a learning organisation. Lack of training could be as a result of a lack of resources. Budget constraints could prevent training from occurring or the employee workload could discourage the release of employees for training. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that an organisation that does not train, will not be able to respond to changing demands, will not be able to transform itself and cannot be defined as an organisation valuing human resource development.

Lack of real empowerment

Farago and Skyrme (1995:4) state that the lack of real empowerment is due to a management approach that is too top-driven and based on tight supervision. The management of a learning organisation is based on enhancing individual capacity and relying on creativity and innovation but too much supervision or control would only impede these goals.

Lawrence (1998:4) identifies specific individual and organisational barriers to the implementation and management of the learning organisation. Individual employees may tend to think that they know everything that they need to know to function effectively and efficiently; they might feel a degree of discomfort with the idea of giving up what they believe or have implemented for a long time; they fear that they might be incompetent for the period it would take them to learn new skills; or they might just experience a degree of mental laziness.

Organisational barriers deal with the assumption that senior management's decisions should not be questioned. A blaming rather than trusting organisational culture would inhibit learning together with an environment where questioning and challenging are not encouraged, would block the sharing of learning. A learning organisation characterised by a cross-functional structure and a strictly hierarchical or too bureaucratic structure could impede the implementation of a learning organisation. Other organisational barriers could include a lack of training time, resources and materials, a lack of recognition for improving capabilities and contributions and a lack of knowledge transfer (Lawrence 1998:5).

Managers need to be able and capable of identifying possible challenges in the implementation of a learning organisation. The challenges themselves offer good learning opportunities for managers. The implementation of a learning organisation is, as has been stated before, an approach to employee training and development. It can be equated with the highest level of self-actualisation in a motivational theory. It is *nirvana* and managers should always strive to provide the best learning environment for their employees.

PROCESS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

As has already been alluded to, the learning organisation does not develop spontaneously. An environment, favouring learning should be established. Furthermore the minds of individuals within the organisation should be primed to be self-directed (Kline & Saunders, 1993:16-17). Thus, it could be argued that managers should ensure that employees are continuously confronted with new challenges that would develop a sense of urgency to consider the whole organisation's operations. It must be borne in mind that employees may have different learning preferences. Therefore, they should be encouraged to discover their own learning and thinking styles and to make their knowledge and styles accessible to others. However, it should also be borne in mind that the learning organisation requires everything to be subject to re-examination and investigation (*Loc. cit.*). This again emphasises the primary characteristic of the learning organisation *viz.* it is not something that is arrived at. It is always in a process of happening.

Kline and Saunders entitled their book: Ten steps to a learning organisation (1993). These steps can be summarized as follows, but it should be emphasised that these steps are actually only guidelines to develop an approach that favours continuous learning to accommodate changing circumstances.

- Assess the learning culture of the organisation, know what everyone thinks and require of each employee to take responsibility for what he/she thinks and does.

- Promote the positive issues in the institution by using the natural flow of thinking and applying it to reality.

- Make the workplace safe for thinking.

- Reward risk taking.

- Help employees to become resources for each other, which would also require that job description be revisited.

- Put the learning power of employees to work as learning is the key to an organisation's survival and success and the capacity of its individual members to learn is the most precious and most inexhaustible resource.

- Map out a vision for the institution, but bear in mind that the development of such a vision depends on teamwork.

- Bring the vision to life.

- Correct the systems as most actions go wrong as a result of faults in the system.

- Get the process introduced.

It is important to note that learning is iterative in character, i.e. it is cyclical and consists of planning-implementing and reflecting. It is not repetitive or an unaltered cycle, but a process (Nadler & Nadler, 1994:27). Therefore the Public Service should not consider the current situation as one at which it has arrived and that it can continue to operate in this manner for the next decade or term of the office of the current minister or the current Cabinet. The following could serve as an example of the nature of the change in thinking required when a learning organisation is developed (Nadler and Nadler, 1994:57).

Traditional Assumptions	Learning-Oriented Assumptions
Each strategic change is a new chapter in the institution's history. There is not much to be gained from looking backward.	Each strategic change is a part of a stream of change efforts. There is a great deal that can be learned from the past.
The future can be predicted. Therefore, plans need to anticipate forecasted changes.	The future is unpredictable. Planning needs to anticipate the possibility of a variety of futures.
A clear, consistent strategic vision will show us the path to the future.	The major value of a strategic vision is that it compels the firm to act and to learn
Strategic change is best achieved through a detailed, formal, comprehensive implementation plan.	Strategic change is best achieved through triggering quick journeys of discovery focused on immediate business issues.

RECEPTIVITY OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Now that attention has been devoted to the concept of a learning organisation, the question should be posed: Can the Public Service become a learning organisation?

In the discussion it has been indicated that the development of a learning organisation requires that attention be paid to leadership qualities, to managerial practices and above all to the development of a culture promoting continuous learning to accommodate continuous change. Unfortunately the Public Service tends to freeze. The window of opportunity to unfreeze the system is relatively short (Nadler & Nadler, 1994:48). Once it refreezes it is nearly impossible to unlock the ingrained processes. Such windows of opportunity are often created with a change in the political structure, change in general policy directives by government or even major international changes e.g. NEPAD, new African Union or new programmes emanating from SADC.

Should the Public Service in South Africa be intent on developing a learning organisation, provision has to be made for learning to be purposefully promoted as an inherent component of its administrative and managerial practices. That would imply continuously questioning and adapting in a well-structured manner its policy advice, human resource practices, organisational structures, financial management and its accountability requirements.

Although the learning organisation requires looking at "wholes" it is important to note that individuals (and teams) are the prime movers of change. Individuals do not learn until they are ready to learn. Therefore, it is required of managers to create an environment conducive to learning and to inspire all employees to participate fully in creating

a learning organisation. A learning organisation requires committed managers and committed employees. Therefore, the justification for continuous learning and change should be promoted regularly.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The learning organisation is based on the concept of an approach that utilises the knowledge and expertise of all employees in an institution. It requires leaders to inculcate a sense of achievement amongst every individual member of the structure to improve the operational capability of the institution.

The Public Service could promote the notion of the public sector as a learning organisation. However, it will be required that attention be devoted to flexibility to accommodate the requirements of the process for the establishment of a culture that would promote a learning organisation. The political structure as well as the administrative and managerial practices have to be reviewed continuously. Last, but perhaps the most important prerequisite is the development of an employee corps aimed at meeting the needs of society and as needs change adapt practices and processes to pre-empt requirements and be open minded as to ways and means to satisfy customer expectations.

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