

# The Necessary Conditions for a Learning Culture

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Since Peter Senge burst on the guru scene in 1990 with his highly popular book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Science of the Learning Organization*, there has been much debate about what it really means to be a learning organization. How do you know if the culture of your organization enhances or inhibits learning? Here is a chart based upon the work of Edgar Schein, one of the top learning organization gurus, that compares the culture of a learning organization to that of the traditional organization.

## Cultures that Enhance and Inhibit Learning

A Culture that Enhances Learning	A Culture that Inhibits Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Leaders balance the interests of all stakeholders--customers, employees, suppliers, the community, and stockholders. Schein says that in a learning organization, "No one group dominates the thinking of management because it is recognized that any one of these groups can slow down and destroy the organization."</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Task issues take precedence over relationship issues. Management is sorted into the "hard" things and "soft" things and the "hard" things are considered to be more important. Leaders pay attention to the hard things—data, money, bottom lines, payoffs, production, competition, structure, and so on. Everyone pays lip service to the "soft" people things and relationship stuff but the real work of management is seen as that which can be quantified. Managers view people as another resource to be used and manipulated like capital and raw materials.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Leaders and managers believe that their people can and will learn, and value learning and change.</li></ul> <p>Schein notes: "It takes a certain amount of idealism about</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Leaders and managers are engineers and technocrats who are pre-occupied with creating and maintaining systems that will be free of human foibles and errors.</li></ul>

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<p>human nature to create a learning culture." That idealism exists in full measure.</p>	<p>A key theme of the culture is designing humans out of the systems rather into them.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People hold the shared belief that they have the capacity to change their environment and that ultimately they make their own fate. This is may be a necessary assumption for learning. After all, writes Schein, "If we believe that the world around us cannot be changed anyway, what is the point of learning to learn. Relax and make the best of your fate."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People in the organization are reactive rather than proactive. They change only in response to outside forces that are seen as threats. People focus on solving problems rather than creating something new.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organization makes time for learning. Some "slack" time is not only allowed but also desired so that it can be used for learning. Schein says, "Lean and mean is not a good prescription for organizational learning."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organization is preoccupied with short-term coping and adapting. Being "lean and mean" dominates the thinking of leaders and managers. The idea of "slack" is unthinkable.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People in the organization have a shared belief that economic, political and socio-cultural events are inter-connected and that this is true inside the organization as well as in the environment. There is a shared commitment to learning and thinking systemically and to understand how things work and especially the consequences of actions over time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work roles and tasks are compartmentalized and separated from family and self-development. "Walls" and "chimneys" separate functions. In solving problems, people believe that the best approach is to break the problem into its components, study and fix each component in isolation, and then synthesize the components back into the whole.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers and employees have a shared commitment to open and extensive communication. The organization has spent some time helping people develop a common vocabulary so that communication can occur. People have a shared commitment to tell the truth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers are presumed to have a "divine right" to information and prerogatives. Financial and other information is kept from all those who do not have a "need to know." Position and access to information confer status and power. People sit on relevant information, put a spin on things to protect their power position, and sometimes actually lie to put themselves in a better light.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People share the belief that trust, teamwork, coordination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual competition is perceived as the natural state</li> </ul>

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and cooperation are critical for success. Individualistic competition is <i>not</i> viewed as the answer to all problems.	and the proper route to power and status. There is a cultural bias toward "rugged individualism." The lone problem solver is seen as a hero. Teamwork is view as a practical necessity but not something that is intrinsically desirable.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders acknowledge their own vulnerability and uncertainty. The leader acts as a teacher and steward of change rather than a charismatic decision maker.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaders and followers assume that leaders are supposed to be in control, decisive, certain, and dominant. Leaders are not allowed to acknowledge their vulnerability</li> </ul>

Well, how did you do? Is your organization one that enhances or inhibits learning? If your organization is like most that Schein and our other gurus encounter, it is probably more of the latter than the former. The truth is that very few organizations today have a learning culture. Moreover, the transformation to a learning culture is, if anything, highly problematic. The learning culture that Schein and our other gurus describe is so far removed from the cultural reality of most workplaces that getting there seems only barely possible. Becoming a learning organization not only requires change, which as we discuss in our article on managing change (see Seven Tips for Managing Organizational Change), is difficult enough, but it requires a great deal of change and the same things that inhibit learning in organizations inhibit that kind of transformative change. It is almost as if you cannot become a learning organization unless you already are one or as one of our clients quipped, "Only learners learn and only learners learn to learn."

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