

Change is ACTION

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We constantly hear the discussion of cultural change in the fire service. Unfortunately, many times it's only talk. Yes, change begins with a discussion; however, true cultural change comes with action. Action by the firefighter, the driver, the company officer, the battalion chief, the deputy chief, and so on. I can keep going, but I think you get the point.

Change occurs collectively from everyone involved in an organization at three important levels: the individual, team, and organizational level. In previous articles, I have mentioned these levels and described organizations that have improved upon them to make their environment dynamic and evolutionary.

So now you should be asking yourself, how can my organization perform a similar assessment and then take the appropriate **action** to make cultural change with the use of learning? Simple. By utilizing a scientific instrument entitled Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) developed by Dr. Karen Watkins and Dr. Victoria Marsick. This questionnaire will allow your organization to identify areas of success, but more importantly, identify areas that need improvement. It has been utilized in numerous organizations, universities, and conferences that I have spoken at over the past year. It's amazing the answers, the dialogue, and the **action** that has come from this instrument.

According to Dr. Watkins and Dr. Marsick, who granted me permission to utilize their survey in my research, at the individual level, organizations must promote inquiry and dialogue as well as create continuous learning opportunities for all personnel. At the team level, an organization must encourage collaboration and team learning. At the organizational level, personnel must be empowered toward a collective vision while creating systems to capture and share learning. Collectively, the aforementioned

characteristics of these three levels are in place for one main goal: to promote continuous learning and transformation of said organization.

Does your organization do this? Why not?

Yeah, I can hear you mumbling. Well, here's a reason to stop mumbling and understand why it's important to operate focusing not only on the culture of your organization, but the learning that does or does not take place to improve it. From their decades of research, Dr. Watkins and Dr. Marsick found overwhelming evidence indicating that "organizations have experienced wave after wave of rapid transformation as global markets and external political and economic changes make it impossible for any business or service-whether private, public, or non-profit-to cling to past ways of doing work" (Watkins and Marsick, 1997). Read that statement again. That's pretty powerful information for the members of this profession that continue to say, "That's the way we've always done it".

Now you should be begging to read more from the DLOQ, right? Well, specifically, it consists of 55 statements, with each one being rated on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 is almost never and 6 is almost always. Here is an example of a few of the statements from the DLOQ that can help you begin the assessment process and get your mind hungry for the rest of the survey. As you read the statements from Dr. Watkins and Dr. Marsick's survey, rate them from 1 (almost never) to 6 (almost always).

Individual Level

- In my organization, people openly discuss mistakes in order to learn from them.
- In my organization, people help each other learn.
- In my organization, people listen to others' views before speaking.
- In my organization, people are encouraged to ask why regardless of rank.
- In my organization, people spend time building trust with each other.

Team Level

- In my organization, teams/groups have the freedom to adapt their goals as needed.

- In my organization, teams/groups treat members as equals, regardless of rank, culture, or other differences.
- In my organization, teams/groups focus on the group's task and how well the group is working.
- In my organization, teams/groups are rewarded for their achievements as a team/group.
- In my organization, teams/groups are confident that the organization will act on their recommendations.

Organizational Level

- My organization enables people to get needed information at any time quickly and easily.
- My organization creates systems to measure gaps between current and expected performance.
- My organization invites people to contribute to the organizations vision.
- My organization considers the impact of decisions on employee morale.
- In my organization, leaders empower others to help carry out the organization's vision.

So how did your organization rate on these 15 statements? Remember, that was only 15 out of

55. Hopefully, those statements and your rating of them helped you identify some areas in your department that need to be improved upon. As you can see, the first step is identification. Once you identify the areas that are in dire need of improvement, then it's time to develop the program to fix them.

Yeah, I hear you mumbling again. "How am I going to get my department to complete this survey?" Again, simple. Attain the complete survey from a scholarly source and place all of the questions and the rating system into a survey program such as kwiksurveys.com or surveymonkey.com. Once the survey is placed in the online program, a link can be mass emailed to everyone in your organization. Then sit back and watch the results come in. Make sure you place a deadline on the survey and stress the fact that it's all 100% anonymous.

If you want to take it a step further, make the survey a mandatory officer development drill. This way, it has to be completed and you will get a higher percentage of respondents. In a world where everyone wants their opinion heard, this survey will allow your entire organizations collective opinions to be heard. Of course, you're going to have outliers in the survey with some individuals rating every statement low and others rating every statement high, however, these balance each other out. From the numerous organizations I have helped complete and analyze the DLOQ, the answers to the statements from the non-outliers are within 1 to 2 ratings of each other. This is consistent with a study that will produce accurate and worthwhile results.

Once the study is completed, you will have a good pulse of your organization. Yes, some of the information is going to take you by surprise. As a leader, you have a few options: 1) take action to address the areas that need improvement, 2) talk about making a change, or 3) continue to act like nothing is wrong. Obviously, the first choice would be more conducive to the growth of your members and the improvement of your organization. Better yet, publish the results of the survey to the department so that they know where the improvements need to be made as well. Will you be able to fix everything? Of course not. The personnel with the boots on the ground will understand this if the survey process and the results are dealt with in a professional, transparent, and humble manner.

Once the results are published, it's time to take action. Not next week, not tomorrow, immediately. Find an area that needs improvement and fix it. What are you waiting for? True leaders don't pass the buck on to the next person; they make a decision to make change. Talk is only good for so long. The troops will see right through this especially if it is a consistent practice by an organizations leaders'. Remember, as a leader we serve our troops, not the other way around. We serve them to make sure they are safe on the streets with the best training, equipment, and culture possible for a dynamic and evolutionary organization. This goes much further than a handshake and a smile. The

troops want a leader that takes action to change their department and its members for the better. Not one that only talks the talk, but when it's time to get dirty, doesn't walk the walk.

Talk is cheap these days. If you want to be a leader that your people will follow and become engrossed in your vision, treat them as equals, be transparent, be humble, and most importantly take action. Don't be the chief officer that relies on the fact that you've been on the job for 30 years. Be the chief officer that has done something to make a difference in those 30 years. Just being around that long doesn't mean you did anything substantial. It means you took up space in a profession that is being flooded with firefighters up to chief officers that take action every hour of every day for safer and more innovative practices. Which one are you.

Change is ACTION, not talk. Do something about it...

References

Watkins, K., & Marsick, V. (1997). *Dimensions of the learning organization questionnaire*. Warwick, RI: Partners for the Learning Organization. Reprinted in Marsick, V., & Watkins, K. (2003). Demonstrating the value of an organization's learning culture: The dimensions of the learning organization questionnaire. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(2), 132-151.

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