

Slash & burn, or learn?

In a six-year project, *Andrew O'Brien* and *Adela J. McMurray* have further developed the learning history methodology to assist businesses evaluate issues such as change, leadership, vision and strategy development.

Basic principles of learning history work

1. Organisations today have a choice – 'slash and burn' or 'learn'.
2. Learning takes place from experience but collective learning from experience is inherently problematic.
3. Communication that fosters learning must embody research, mythic and pragmatic imperatives.
4. No one voice provides 'the answer' – people accept others' viewpoints in the context of their own.
5. 'You are not alone' – all particular instances are reflections of universal patterns.
6. Organisations 'know' what they need to hear but lack the capacity to listen.
7. Organisations need an established infrastructure for reflection.
8. Learning involves change, and change may be difficult.
9. Stories convey intangibles.

Source Kleiner, A. & Roth, G., 1996, *The Three Imperatives, Field Manual for a Learning Historian*, MIT-COL and Reflection Learning Associates, Cambridge, MA, pp. 11–13

Although winning in business means learning better and faster, the actual art of learning itself is not well understood and traditional financial performance measures fail to calculate its success. Worse news still for those wanting to measure learning is that when people are learning, dissatisfaction increases as the gap between their aspirations and their new understanding of current problems grows.

The learning history approach is designed to enhance how a business questions and learns about underlying assumptions and behaviours and helps businesses and researchers uncover defensive routines that arise from people covering up their mistakes. The Learning History Methodology commenced in 1994 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Centre for Organizational Learning and approaches learning through incremental techniques leading to transformative learning. It assists learning and measurement of learning in a number of ways and its basic principles are outlined in the box (see left). The learning history owes much to ethnography, action research, organisational development and oral history. It also involves action research with content design from theories of learning and social construction and is written in six stages – planning, interviewing, distillation, writing, validation and dissemination.

LEARNING HISTORY DEVELOPMENT

Some people think and understand visually which bypasses the limitations of words. This study looked at the development of visual images as part of learning history at Monash University and Monyx Pty Ltd, a company that provides catering, bookshops, sporting facilities, student development programs, conferences, facilities and consulting to higher education, government and the private sector.

Two learning histories have been undertaken at Monyx Pty Ltd. The first, in 2003, focused on the development of the organisation's core theory of success as a key element of the organisation's strategy and the second, more extensive study in 2006, focused on the strategies towards the development of shared vision.

Two of the key themes from the 2006 learning history study were the surfacing of mental models and the role of learning in allowing leaders to think differently. The cartoon (above right) highlights the fact that learning is vital for success. After a series of learning activities, the business is moving to a new paradigm of feedback and reflection to assist learning and customer responsiveness.



OPEN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CURRENT REALITY

The following is an excerpt from the 2003 learning history focusing on strategy development. A staff member describes how the learning history assists in surfacing views on challenges and promotes a shared understanding. This comment has been examined by the learning history team, and has been converted to the cartoon shown below with a view to making the research findings more accessible and to promote learning.

AH-HA. The eye cannot see itself and in this example the organisation may have uncovered a profound learning. How often do people hold the view: I'm fine and everyone else needs to improve? What impact does this have on performance?

The one that sticks in my mind is the feedback from one of the last workshops. A number of people said: "I think we give good service but I don't know about everybody else", which was repeated by four, five or six different reports. So we all saw that we are ok. It's everybody else that has a problem. Everybody points the finger at everybody else, saying it's all your problem, it's not my problem. I think it was a really insightful piece of data that we would not have got through a different process. Workshop Participant



The relationship between vision and leadership was an important focus for the 2006 learning history. It was widely agreed that vision was important; however, different perspectives existed on the degree to which leadership should push a vision as opposed to fostering collective vision with an example provided in the following extract. As a central objective of the learning history is to raise questions, the illustration contrasts the CEO as provider of vision and the leader as vision process facilitator which raises many questions including: What is the long-term impact of a business changing vision every time the CEO changes? What is a process for developing shared vision? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to vision development?

Leadership plays a key role in fostering vision which is recognised as a difficult task and is described as a process as opposed to a product.

Leadership is probably the most important area for fostering the future vision for the company. I think that it's important that there is good leadership of that process and that it's communicated and co-ordinated well. Sports Team Member



Vision does not just appear with leaders facilitating the process for change, but not 'mandating' the vision.

I think the leadership is absolutely crucial. The vision doesn't appear spontaneously, sort of like coming to a theatre near you. Somebody, or a group of people or a group of leaders, has to almost bring it in (with them) or intervene. It's almost like the definition of who the leaders are. They're not the ones who decide what the vision is but they actually make something happen.

Commercial Services Team Member

CONVERSATION, PHYSICAL SPACES, LEARNING

Leaders commented that some spaces enhanced learning and others didn't. The following extracts from learning history captures the leaders' views on physical space and learning whilst the illustration brings the research findings to life in a drawing that contrasts two different approaches to meeting room design.

Quality conversation is also influenced by the physical environment.

The physical environment can certainly contribute to the quality of conversations – if it makes people feel comfortable, is removed from day-to-day pressures and allows people to focus on what is being discussed.

Executive Team Member



In a traditional boardroom, people tend to think: "The thing that I want to talk about is number seven on the agenda so I'll put my brain past the first six things... I'll talk about my thing and then I'll turn my brain off for the other things." Conversation circles and round tables try and create a different dynamic. Network Leader

Accepting individual responsibility.

An organisation can help people and connect, educate and explain and facilitate, all that sort of stuff, but ultimately it's about the individual taking responsibility to make choices.

Sports Team Member

PERSONAL VISION, MASTERY AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Another issue was how much individuals choose to be either part of the organisation or trapped within it. The following extracts (over page) from the learning history look at the alignment of individual and organisational vision and values as well as questions about the responsibilities of organisations and individuals for career planning, personal development, ongoing education and what Peter Senge (a leading thinker on organisational learning) refers to as "personal mastery". A validation workshop held as part of the learning history process found participants raised a wide range of issues associated with each cartoon as well as unique interpretations. Some of the issues identified by the cartoon (over page) relate to change, vision and personal mastery. This cartoon also outlines a key issue raised in the learning history relating to values alignment and the contrasting views of individuals of their capacity to influence their own future.

Career planning is a good initiative – encouraging people to think about their work situation and whether or not they are achieving what they want to achieve at this organisation. And if they are not, prompting them to consider alternative career paths outside of this company. We want to discourage people from simply hanging around if they are unhappy – which is not a good outcome for either party.

Executive Team Member

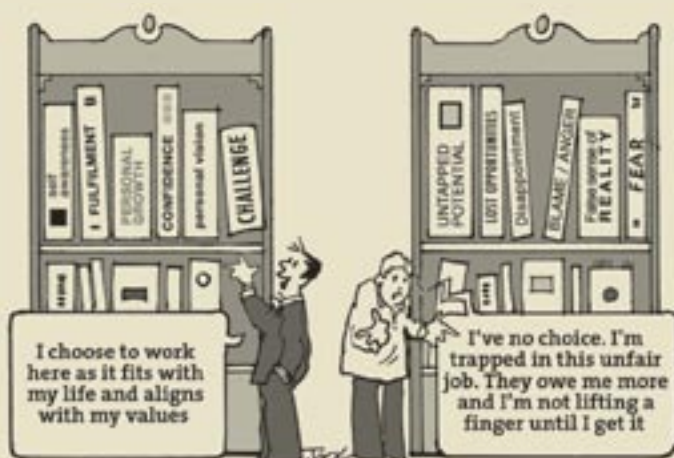
Individual responsibility for career planning and personal vision.

Although relatively new and still evolving, the learning history is a great way for measuring and understanding incremental-transformative learning and change efforts while eliminating the day-to-day defensive routines that undermine learning. Introducing drawings and cartoons is an innovative way of portraying research findings and broadening the audience. The examples outlined in this article provide a small snapshot of the many issues raised in the learning history and provide an insight into the power of the learning history to assist enterprises to make improvements through learning and for researchers to study organisations from another perspective.

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