

REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF MEMORY IN INDIVIDUAL & GROUP (ORGANIZATIONAL) LEARNING

I n d i v i d u a l L e a r n i n g

Human beings come into the world equipped with reflexes and sensory capabilities. Motor capabilities are very limited and immature. Our nervous system is not yet “hard wired,” as the myelin sheath that makes it work smoothly does not yet cover the peripheral nerves. We use our reflexes and limited motor capabilities to act on the environment. We use our sensory capabilities to take in information about the environment, and the results of our actions. By using these “schemes,” we begin to learn about the world. By using our short-term memory, we learn to modify our immediate actions. As we grow and develop through childhood, we begin to build the complex neural and biochemical network inside our brains that categorizes, links, and selectively stores our short-term memories to build long-term memory. As we continue to grow and develop through adulthood, our repository of long-term memories continues to grow, and the linkages between stored memories become more complex. Our long-term memories enable us to build on what we have previously learned, so that we come to each new situation with increasingly greater amounts of knowledge at our disposal. We are no longer forced to rely on first-hand learning in each and every new situation, but bring to them knowledge from our previous experiences that enables us to learn faster and more economically. To each new situation, adult learners bring the sum total of their life experience. Additionally, the linkages that are established between long-term memories enable us to see the complex interrelationships and patterns within and among events that are not apparent to us earlier in our lives. (Beginning of wisdom?)

O r g a n i z a t i o n a l L e a r n i n g

For purposes of this discussion, an organization is defined as two or more individuals who have merged their thoughts, feelings, and actions to achieve a common goal. Each individual brings to the group the sum total of his/her life experience, and if willing to share, makes these experiences available to the group. As long as the composition of the group remains stable over time (no turnover for at least 5-8 years) and relatively small (2-4 people), memory of the group’s process knowledge, decisions, actions, and rationales resides in the long-term memory of the individuals.

Difficulty arises when someone leaves the original group (moves on to another job, retires, dies, becomes ill), and is replaced by a new person. When someone leaves the group, he/she takes his/her unique perspective of the group’s process knowledge, decisions, actions, and rationales that were stored in his/her long-term memory. If the entire composition of the group turns over, eventually there is no one left who holds in his/her individual long-term memory the process knowledge, decisions, actions, and rationales of the original group. To make the newcomers’ situation even more difficult, the impact of decisions and actions of the original group may not be felt within the organization until 5-8 years later, when no one is left who remembers these decisions and actions, never mind the rationales. Without a collective long-term memory for the

organization, there is no foundation for organizational learning to occur over time. The complex structure of interrelationships that grows within the long-term memory of individuals never occurs. The organization is forced to “re-invent the wheel” as turnover occurs within the group, and group members take their individual long-term memories with them as they leave.

How, then, can organizations develop a methodology for transferring the long-term memories of individuals into a long-term memory for the organization, so that these memories can be captured, stored and easily accessed by successive generations of group members? Knowledge Harvesting.