

The Oxford Handbook of the Learning Organization

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198832355.001.0001>

Published: 2019

Online ISBN: 9780191885570

Print ISBN: 9780198832355

CHAPTER

5 Garvin's Learning Organization: A Process Perspective on Learning for Implementation, Improvement, and Innovation

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198832355.013.4> Pages 67–86

Published: 08 January 2020

Abstract

This chapter summarizes David A. Garvin's model of the learning organization and compares and contrasts Garvin's perspective with those of other scholars. The chapter begins by presenting Garvin's original definition of the learning organization, the processes learning organizations excel at managing, and ways to measure whether an organization is a learning organization. Next, the chapter describes Garvin's revisions to his model over time, including changes to his definition, an increased emphasis on enablers of organizational learning, and additional ways to assess learning organizations. The chapter then positions Garvin's perspective within the broader literature on the learning organization, identifying his focus on learning processes as a distinctive contribution. Finally, it assesses the impact of Garvin's definition on both research and practice and speculates on the relevance of Garvin's learning organization to present and future organizations.

Keywords: [learning organization](#), [David A. Garvin](#), [organization](#), [learning processes](#), [organizational learning](#)

Subject: [Organizational Theory and Behaviour](#), [Business and Management](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

At the heart of organizational learning lies a set of processes that can be designed, deployed, and led. (Garvin 2000: x)

Introduction

THE opening quote, from the late Harvard Business School (HBS) professor and management scholar David A. Garvin, aptly reflects Garvin's view of the learning organization. A distinguished operations researcher, Garvin gained prominence in the 1980s through his exploration of why Japanese manufacturers had leapt ahead of their American competitors (Garvin 1984, 1987; Hayes and Garvin 1982). In Garvin's estimation, the Japanese's success lay in a superior set of management *processes*—ones that allowed them to produce higher quality products, more reliably, and at lower cost. While America's concern with manufacturing would wane as its economy transitioned into services, Garvin's high regard for process would carry over into his later ↪ research. Indeed, thereafter, Garvin viewed most, if not all, managerial and organizational behavior—decision making, communication, change management, and even advice-giving—through the lens of process (Garvin 1998; Garvin and Margolis 2015; Garvin and Roberto 2001, 2005).

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Organizational learning was no different. As the learning organization concept began to catch on in the early 1990s—largely due to the work of Peter Senge (1990)—Garvin recognized an opportunity to apply his tough-minded, process-centric approach to work to help organizations not just manage quality, but also learn and compete more effectively. The result was an operationally-focused take on the learning organization—one aimed at assisting managers in closing the gap between what Garvin deemed to be idyllic writings on the learning organization, and actual progress within organizations (Garvin 1993). In this chapter, I outline Garvin's perspective on the learning organization as a system of learning processes through which organizations acquire, interpret, and apply information in order to get work done, improve operations, and innovate for the future.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section, I summarize Garvin's take on the learning organization as first introduced in 1993. In the following section, I describe the evolution of Garvin's thinking about the learning organization over time. Then, I compare and contrast Garvin's perspective of the learning organization to those of other scholars, pointing out similarities as well as distinctive differences and contributions. Finally, I describe the impact that Garvin's perspective has had on research and practice and assess the relevance of Garvin's learning organization to modern businesses today.

Garvin's Take on the Learning Organization (LO)

Of Garvin's many talents as a scholar and teacher, one of his most impressive was his ability to distill complex topics into short, memorable lists to guide the focus of researchers and practitioners. Three items per list seemed to be Garvin's magic formula. Indeed, in his first writing on the topic of the learning organization in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1993, Garvin directed readers' attention to three unresolved issues—three “M's”—to help them better understand: (1) what a learning organization was, (2) what practices it excelled at, and (3) how one could measure learning and progress toward becoming a learning organization. These issues he called: (1) meaning, (2) management, and (3) measurement.

Meaning: What Is a Learning Organization?

Formal definition. According to Garvin (1993: 72), a learning organization is “an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.” In this definition, one is able to detect ↪ the influence of Garvin's operations background (Garvin 1987; Hayes and Garvin 1982) on how he conceptualized the learning organization. To Garvin, learning organizations did not just do a single thing well; instead, learning organizations were skilled at managing several manifestations of the organizational learning *process*.

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Learning as a process. Garvin (1998: 33) defined processes as “collections of tasks and activities that together—and only together—transform inputs into outputs ... inputs and outputs can be as varied as materials, information, and people.” The product development process, for example, consists of a sequence of tasks and activities that transforms ideas, money, and know-how into a valuable product or service. However, processes need not be operational in nature; they may also be used to describe sequences of managerial or organizational behavior, for example, how one makes decisions or communicates (Garvin 1998). In the same vein, processes can be used to describe too how organizations transform information and ideas into improved ways of behaving and working—in other words, how they learn.

To Garvin (1993), the organizational learning process involved three distinct, yet overlapping, stages: (1) creating or acquiring information, (2) transferring information, and (3) modifying behavior in line with new information. See Figure 5.1 for a depiction of Garvin’s original formulation.

Figure 5.1.



p. 70 ↳ Garvin’s organizational learning process (1993).

In order for learning to occur, an organization must first produce new ideas internally (e.g., from employees, from reflecting on past experience, from producing new data from experiments, etc.) or obtain new information from its external environment (e.g., from competitors, customers, news media, etc.). Whether the source is internal or external, such knowledge serves as the crucial input for getting work done, making improvements, and innovating.

However, new knowledge stored in the heads of a few employees or residing in a single department or division is of little use to the broader organization. For new knowledge to have maximal impact, it must be transferred to others in the organization. As Garvin (2000: 11) put it, “New ideas must diffuse rapidly throughout the organization, extending from person to person, department to department, and division to division.”

Still, pure knowledge—even transferred to all employees—is not enough for organizational learning to occur. According to Garvin, an organization should only be considered a learning organization if it is able to apply new information and ideas to its operations and decision making, change the way people behave, and alter how work gets done. Learning organizations don’t just think about new ideas—they act on them.

In short, Garvin (1993) defined the learning organization as an organization highly skilled at managing this three-stage organizational learning process in order to maintain or improve its performance.

Management: The Key Practices of a Learning Organization

Based on this definition of organizational learning, Garvin (1993) articulated five key practices or processes that learning organizations are particularly skilled at managing: (1) problem solving, (2) experimentation, (3) learning from past experience, (4) learning from others, and (5) quickly and efficiently transferring knowledge. While each of these activities differs in purpose and focus, all are learning processes consisting of the same acquire–transfer–change behavior stages of learning. See Table 5.1 for a description of each of these building blocks. “By creating systems and processes that support these activities and integrate them into the fabric of daily operations,” Garvin (2000: 73) wrote, “companies can manage their learning more effectively” and become learning organizations.

Table 5.1 The five practices of a learning organization

Practices of a learning organization	Description	Forms	Purpose
Problem solving	The identification and diagnosis of a problem, and the generation, selection, implementation, and evaluation of alternative solutions	• Scientific method • TQM • Lean manufacturing • Six Sigma	To close the gap between desired and actual performance
Experimenting	The systematic search for, generation, and testing of new knowledge	• Exploration • Confirmation/hypothesis-testing	To determine underlying cause and effect relationships
Learning from others	Speaking with or studying other companies or customers	• Benchmarking competitors • Customer surveys and focus groups • Direct observation of customers and competitors	To uncover new ways of doing things or ideas for new products or processes
Learning from experience	Reviewing past successes and failures, assessing them systematically, and recording the lessons in a usable form for others in the organization to easily use	• Case studies • Post-project reviews • “Lessons learned” repositories • Peer assist programs	To better understand why poor performance occurred in order to prevent or correct from it in the future To determine the key factors behind good performance and how to maintain them in the future
Transferring knowledge	The sharing of new knowledge and insights broadly throughout the organization	• Reports and memos • Site visits and tours • Personnel rotation programs • Education and training programs • Standardization programs	To ensure that knowledge has maximal organizational impact

Systematic problem solving. Given Garvin's operations background and earlier research on quality management, it's no surprise that the first building block of his learning organization is systematic problem solving. Whether it was total quality management (TQM), lean manufacturing, Six Sigma, or some other method, Garvin believed the systematic identification and analysis of problems, and the generation, selection, implementation, and evaluation of alternative solutions, to be crucial to the continued performance of organizations (Garvin 1993). Learning organizations not only train employees in the techniques necessary to solve problems well (e.g., data collection, analysis, etc.), but also encourage them to think scientifically, use data, and test assumptions in all aspects of their work. Employees in learning organizations continually ask, "How do we know that's true?" to get to the root cause of problems and challenge one another to back up intuitions with hard data.

Experimenting. Learning organizations not only engage in systematic problem solving to address current difficulties, but also regularly run experiments to produce new knowledge and uncover opportunities for future improvement and innovation. Garvin (1993) identified two forms of experimentation: (1) ongoing programs, a series of small experiments designed to produce incremental gains in knowledge and improvements over time, and (2) demonstration projects, large, one-off experiments designed to test the viability of a new product, process, or technology. Garvin (2000) would later call these hypothesis-testing and exploratory experiments. According to Garvin (1993), organizations skilled in experimenting share a number of commonalities, including methods to elicit a continual flow of new ideas, an incentive system that rewards smart risk-taking, and programs that train employees in how to design, develop, run, and evaluate the effect of experiments.

Learning from experience. The third building block of Garvin's learning organization is the ability to learn from past experience. While many organizations often continue to repeat mistakes, learning organizations are skilled at reviewing their failures (and successes), systematically assessing them, and recording lessons learned in a form that is useful and accessible for other employees. Examples of methods of learning from experience include case studies, post-project reviews, and lessons learned repositories. ↴

Of all the organizations he studied, Garvin particularly admired the US Army's approach to learning from experience: the "After-Action Review" (AAR) (Garvin 2000). An AAR is a post-mission audit designed to assess performance and draw lessons learned. An AAR is organized around four questions: (1) "What did we set out to do?"; (2) "What actually happened?"; (3) "Why was there a difference between (1) and (2)?"; and (4) "What will we do differently next time (i.e., maintain, change)?" The Army stores the takeaways from these exercises in a centralized repository for others to access and refer to for future missions. In this way, the Army prevents (potentially life-threatening) mistakes from occurring more than once.

Learning from others. Organizations not only learn from their own past experiences, but also from the experience and knowledge of relevant others. According to Garvin (1993), learning organizations are good at acquiring and incorporating insights from two groups in particular: (1) other companies, and (2) customers. First, learning organizations are skilled at benchmarking the practices of other companies. Like other forms of organizational learning, benchmarking is not a one-time field trip, but a multi-stage process involving systematic acquisition of knowledge from site visits of best practice companies and interviews with their managers and employees, careful analysis of the data obtained and how one's own practices compare, transfer of key insights and recommendations for adoption throughout the organizations, and implementation of similar practices within one's own organization tailored to one's unique context. The most advanced organizations study not only the practices of companies within their industry, but actively search for practices outside of their industry that they can creatively adapt in their business.

Second, learning organizations are skilled at acquiring information from current and future customers. Rather than adopt a philosophy of "build-it-and-they-will-come," such organizations continuously

gather information on customer needs and preferences, feedback on products and services, knowledge about competing offerings, and other customer insights. They may extract such data in multiple forms, including surveys, focus groups, or conjoint analysis. In the case that customers cannot articulate their needs or feelings, learning organizations may study customers in action—at home, while shopping, or browsing the Web. Whatever the means, learning organizations are eager to hear what customers have to say, and do not shy away from bad customer reviews. On the contrary, they are highly receptive to criticism, viewing it as crucial input to their process of learning and improvement.

Transferring knowledge. The fifth and final task of a learning organization, according to Garvin (1993), is the fast and efficient transfer of knowledge throughout the organization. Knowledge transfer may take many forms, including written, oral, and visual reports, site visits and tours, personnel rotations, education and training programs, knowledge management databases, real-time communication and collaboration platforms, and many others. The most advanced organizations not only have the tools and technologies to exchange information, but also the incentives in place to get people to actually use them, such as rewards for division adoption or cross-departmental collaboration bonuses.

p. 73 In sum, Garvin's learning organization excels at translating new information into changes in behavior that impact its bottom line, namely via the five learning practices outlined above.

Measurement: Assessing Learning

For Garvin, it was not enough for companies to merely engage in the five tasks of a learning organization; if companies hoped to manage such activities effectively, they had to be able to measure whether learning was, in fact, happening. For him, that included assessing: (1) changes in performance, and (2) changes in employee thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

Measuring learning from changes in results. To measure whether learning has occurred, Garvin (1993) recommended organizations utilize a measure called the "half-life curve." Similar to the learning and experience curves of earlier decades (Arrow 1962; "Perspectives on Experience" 1972; Wright 1936), the half-life curve, pioneered by Analog Devices in the 1980s, measures the time it takes to achieve a 50 percent improvement in some metric of interest, such as cost, time-to-market, customer satisfaction, and others (Stata 1989). The steeper the curve, the more rapid the learning. By using half-life curves and similar tools to track changes in relevant performance metrics over time, organizations could infer that learning was or was not, in fact, occurring.

Measuring learning from changes in employee behaviors. While measuring changes in performance over time provides some evidence of learning, measuring learning based on results fails to account for shorter term learning that may not result in changes in performance for some time. As such, Garvin (1993) recommended organizations assess not only changes in performance, but also changes in thinking and behaving that may produce future organizational improvements. For example, he recommended that organizations utilize employee surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and other information gathering tools to look for changes in content knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and patterns of thinking. Similarly, managers may observe employee behavior over time to detect whether learning initiatives are, in fact, having an impact. With data on employees in hand, managers could then determine whether changes in thinking and behaving were correlated with later results. In this way, an organization could conduct a "learning audit" to see if it was progressing.

Evolution of Garvin's Thinking

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Subsequent to his initial writing on the learning organization, David Garvin worked with a number of organizations across a wide range of industries to improve their organizational learning processes and help them move closer to the learning organization ideal. Based on his experience working with these companies, Garvin would revise each of his “three M’s” over time to make his learning organization prescription even more useful for managers and organizations.

Measurement: A Revised LO Definition

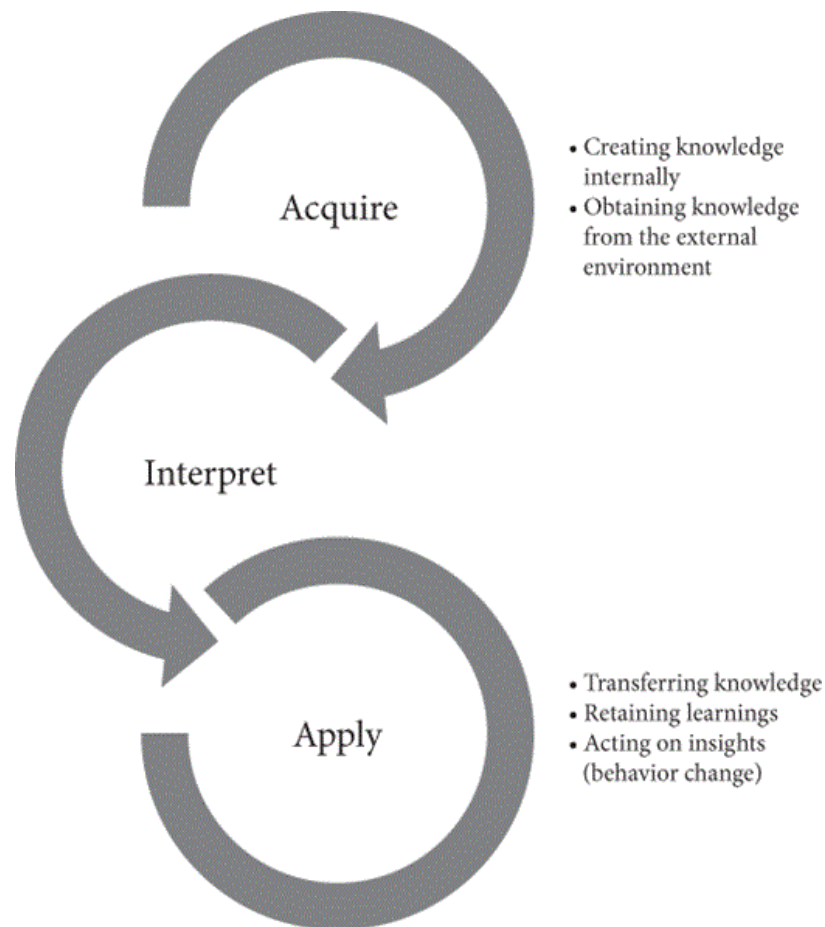
At the turn of the century, Garvin published his first and only book on the learning organization, *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work*, in which he offered a more comprehensive definition of the concept. According to Garvin (2000: 11), “A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge, and at purposefully modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.” The inclusion of “interpreting” and “retaining” knowledge as additional stages of learning in this revised definition reflected a number of key insights Garvin had gleaned since his original writing seven years earlier.

First, influenced by Karl Weick’s theory of organizations as interpretation systems (Daft and Weick 1984), Garvin recognized that the mere acquisition of data did organizations little good if they could not effectively process and analyze the information. As he put it, “Even if organizations were able to acquire all essential information, they would still need to interpret it ... Unadorned facts and opinions are ... only useful after they have been classified, grouped, or placed within a larger context” (2000: 24). Garvin’s decision to include interpretation as its own stage of learning in his model was also influenced by a number of high-profile decision making failures he studied and taught in his courses, including John F. Kennedy’s decision making in the Bay of Pigs (Schlesinger 1965) and the Mount Everest tragedy of 1996 (Roberto 2002).

Second, in working more closely with organizations, Garvin recognized a common problem: despite increased efforts to share information more broadly, companies still tended to lose crucial knowledge and skills when people left. In other words, while insights were being transferred between individuals, they were not being *retained* in any systematic way at an organizational level. Seeing this shortcoming, Garvin added a new retention stage to his organizational learning model. As Garvin (2000: 11) put it, “New ideas ... must become embedded in organizational ‘memory,’ appearing as policies procedures, and norms to ensure that they are retained over time.” This new stage aligned with earlier research on organizational learning and memory (Levitt and March 1988; Stata 1989).

So that managers would remember what it meant for their organization to learn, he also simplified his (now) six stages of learning to three: (1) acquiring knowledge (through creating it internally or obtaining it from the external environment), (2) interpreting knowledge, and (3) applying knowledge (through transferring it broadly, retaining it, and using it as a basis for changing organizational behavior). See Figure 5.2 for a revised learning organization model.

Figure 5.2.



Garvin's revised organizational learning process (2000).

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Management: Intelligence Gathering—the Sixth Building Block

In addition to revising his definition of the learning organization, Garvin also added another practice to his learning organization's toolbox: intelligence gathering. According to Garvin (2000: 48), intelligence gathering is the "collection and interpretation of information that exists outside the organization," usually for use in strategy formulation and organizational decision making. Like the other practices of his learning organization, intelligence gathering is a learning process in which managers "decide what information to look for, figure out where to look, assemble the raw material, determine its meaning and implications, and then disseminate their findings to relevant parties" (Garvin 2000: 49). The practice takes three main forms: (1) the search for existing data (e.g., monitoring industry news, examining publicly available information, etc.), (2) inquiry to generate new data (e.g., conducting customer surveys, performing market research, etc.), or (3) observation of external actors to uncover new insights (e.g., customer studies, etc.) (Garvin 2000).

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Garvin's decision to add this sixth building block was influenced by his work with a number of organizations, including British Petroleum, Xerox, L.L. Bean, the US Forest Service, and the US Army. He was particularly impressed by the Army's well-crafted processes for gathering data during missions and analyzing them after to produce insights for others to utilize via its Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL).

Management: Environment/Climate and Leadership

The biggest evolution in Garvin's thinking on learning organizations was an increased emphasis on not only formal learning processes like problem solving and benchmarking, but also more informal organizational mechanisms to support such processes and make them run smoothly. Two enablers were particularly fundamental: (1) a supportive environment/climate for learning, and (2) leadership that supports learning.

A supportive learning environment. First, as he studied organizations and assisted others in improving their organizational learning processes, Garvin recognized that the learning processes he advocated did not come naturally to many organizations. On the contrary, most organizations faced what Garvin termed a number of common "learning disabilities" that impeded their efforts to manage learning effectively. Organizations fell victim to these problems at each stage of the learning process. See Table 5.2 for a list of disabilities and some of their common manifestations.

Table 5.2 Common organizational learning "disabilities"

Stage of learning	Disability	Common manifestations
Acquisition of knowledge	Oversights or errors in the way the organization collects information, resulting in incomplete or biased data	• Organizational blind spots • Information filtering • Lack of information sharing
Interpretation of knowledge	Distortions in the way that information is processed and analyzed, resulting in flawed decisions	• Over-confidence bias • Confirmation bias • Hindsight bias
Application of knowledge	Unwillingness to act on new knowledge or inability to act on it effectively	• Organizational inertia • Risk-aversion • Lack of self-awareness • Lack of time to change behaviors

To combat these disabilities, Garvin argued that organizations had to be proactive about creating a climate conducive to learning. Such an environment is characterized by four conditions: "the recognition and acceptance of differences; the provision of timely, unvarnished feedback; the pursuit of new ways of thinking and untapped sources of information; and the acceptance of errors, mistakes, and occasional failures as the price of improvement" (Garvin 2000: 34). See Table 5.3 for a description of these conditions and their function in promoting learning.

Table 5.3 Enabling supportive learning environments

Enabling condition	Function(s)
Recognition and acceptance of differences	• Allows diverging viewpoints to be shared, tensions resolved, and new insights to be produced • Provides energy and motivation for organizational learning and change
Provision of timely, accurate feedback	• Allows for fast and efficient problem solving and experimentation • Provides objective data to be used in decision making
Openness to new ideas	• Provides the basis for improving organizational practices • Ensures a steady flow of innovative ideas for new offerings
Tolerance for errors, mistakes, and failure	• Facilitates risk-taking and experimentation • Encourages speaking up about problems and opportunities

In his later work with Amy C. Edmondson and Francesca Gino, Garvin would revise these conditions to be: valuing differences, time for reflection, openness to new ideas, and psychological safety (Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino 2008). See Edmondson, Gino, and Healy (Chapter 20 in this volume) for definitions of these four conditions and Garvin et al. (2008) for a longer description of each.

By creating a culture in which differences were respected and valued, information flowed freely, new ideas were offered often, and employees were not afraid to speak up about errors or mistakes, Garvin believed that organizations could grease the gears of his six learning practices and build a learning organization more quickly.

Leadership that supports learning. While learning processes and a supportive learning environment were crucial to building a learning organization, Garvin recognized that these factors would not materialize on their own. Instead, organizations needed leaders to design and manage learning processes and create a supportive climate for them to operate. In other words, learning organizations require managers to lead the learning process. For Garvin (2000), “leading learning” involved four actions: creating opportunities for learning, setting the right tone, leading effective discussions, and engaging in individual learning. See Table 5.4 for a summary of these leadership requirements, their function in promoting learning, and some examples. See Garvin et al. (2008) for a longer discussion on how managers can lead learning.

Table 5.4 Leading learning

Requirement	Function(s)	Actions
Creating opportunities for learning	• Establishes learning as an organizational priority • Provides a time and place for learning to occur	• Create learning forums • Assign people exploratory projects • Design shared experiences
Setting the right tone	• Creates the desired climate for learning • Encourages open-ended inquiry	• Engage in challenge and dissent • Provide security and support • Ensure a free flow of information • Practice open communication
Leading effective discussions	• Guides discussions towards new learnings and insights • Models desired behaviors for others to practice	• Ask the right questions • Attentively listen • Respond appreciatively
Remaining open to learning oneself	• Promotes personal learning and development • Models desired behaviors for others to practice	• Remain open to new perspectives • Identify and account for personal biases and shortcomings • Ask for raw data • Cultivate a sense of humility

By creating opportunities for people to learn, challenging employees while at the same time supporting them, learning to lead effective, inquiry-based discussions, and engaging in lifelong learning themselves, Garvin believed leaders could operate the practices of the learning organization and build a learning culture.

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Measurement: Informal and Formal Measuring Sticks

One final evolution in Garvin's thinking on the learning organization was an increased focus on new ways for managers to assess progress towards becoming a learning organization. In addition to the suggestions provided in his original 1993 article, Garvin developed two more ways for managers to measure the extent of learning in their organizations: (1) quick and dirty litmus tests, and (2) a formal learning organization survey.

Litmus tests. In his 2000 book, Garvin provided managers with a list of simple questions—what he dubbed “litmus tests”—to assess whether they worked in a learning organization. Questions included:

- Does the organization have a defined learning agenda?
- Is the organization open to new, sometimes discordant, information?
- Does the organization avoid repeated mistakes?

- Does the organization retain critical knowledge when people leave?
- Does the organization act on what it knows?

If the answer to any of these questions was “no,” the managers’ company did not qualify as a learning organization. Garvin intended these tests to be quick and easy prompts for managers to determine which areas to focus.

p. 79 *The Learning Organization Survey (LOS)*. In later work with Amy C. Edmondson and Francesca Gino, Garvin would develop a more formal tool for both researchers and practitioners to measure organizational learning: the Learning Organization Survey (LOS) (Garvin et al. 2008). Building on Garvin’s earlier work (1993, 2000), as well as Edmondson’s work on learning in teams (1999, 2002, 2003), the LOS consists of a set of questions to measure ten organizational learning constructs across three clusters: (1) learning climate, (2) learning processes, and (3) leadership that supports learning. Studies have shown the LOS to be a valid, reliable way to measure differences in learning across organizations, or work units within the same organization (Edmondson, Gino, and Healy, Chapter 20 in this volume). For an in-depth description of the LOS, see Garvin et al. (2008). For more on how the tool was developed and its psychometric properties, see Edmondson, Gino, and Healy (Chapter 20 in this volume).

Garvin’s Perspective in Perspective

Considering Garvin’s perspective against the backdrop of the broader learning organization literature, one may detect commonalities and overlaps, as well as a few crucial differences that make for distinctive contributions.

Similarities with Other Conceptions

One useful way to organize the literature on learning organizations comes from Örtenblad (2002, 2004, 2013, 2018). Conducting a comprehensive review of works that used the term “learning organization,” Örtenblad (2002) classified learning organization perspectives into four main categories: (1) organizational learning, (2) climate for learning, (3) learning at work, and (4) learning structure. These categories are not mutually exclusive, with many conceptions of the learning organization consisting of elements from each (Örtenblad 2004). Indeed, based on this categorization, Garvin’s perspective on the learning organization possesses elements from several groups.

p. 80 *Organizational learning*. Works in Örtenblad’s (2002) first bucket, *organizational learning*, build on a long line of research on organizational learning (Argyris and Schön 1978; Huber 1991; Kim 1993; Levitt and March 1988; Miner and Mezias 1996; Shrivastava 1983). According to this research, learning occurs at both the individual and organizational levels, with individuals acting as organizational agents of learning (Argyris and Schön 1978) and knowledge stored as organizational memory in the form of routines, processes, procedures, and shared mental models (Hedberg 1981). Organizational learning occurs when an organization updates its memory in such a way to guide future organizational behavior (Huber 1991). In line with this research, several scholars of the learning organization argue that a learning organization is skilled at translating new information into new ways of behaving that enhance its capacity to compete (Garvin 1993, 2000; Marquardt, Chapter 7 in this volume; Marquardt and Reynolds 1994; Watkins and Marsick 1993; Watkins and Marsick, Chapter 4 in this volume). For instance, Watkins and Marsick (1993: 8–9) write that, “The learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself. Learning takes place in individuals, teams, the organization, and even the communities with which the organization interacts ... Learning results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors [and] enhances organizational capacity for

innovation and growth.” Garvin’s original conception of the learning organization, which emphasized the processing of information and changes in organizational behavior and framed learning as the source of organizational improvement and competitive advantage, is most similar to research in this category.

Climate for learning. Works in Örtenblad’s (2002) second category, climate for learning, conceptualize the learning organization as one that facilitates the learning of its individual employees (Beck 1989; Garratt 1987; Garvin 2000; Garvin et al. 2008; Marquardt and Reynolds 1994; Pedler and Aspinwall 1998; Pedler, Boydell, and Burgoyne, Chapter 6 in this volume; Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell 1991; Watkins and Marsick 1993; Watkins and Marsick, Chapter 4 in this volume). For instance, Pedler and Aspinwall (1998: 43) write that, “Some organizations create better conditions for ... learning than others. They make learning a value at the heart of the enterprise, they encourage people to talk to each other, they simply have a better ‘learning climate.’” Similarly, Garratt (1987: 24) writes that the key role of directors in a learning organization is to “create the climate by which learning is encouraged, rewarded, and allows to flow freely around the organization.” Garvin’s later work, which emphasized the importance of having an organizational climate that appreciates differences, tolerates errors and failures, and is open to hearing new ideas, echoes the prescriptions of other scholars in this category (Garvin 2000; Garvin et al. 2008).

Learning at work. Authors in Örtenblad’s (2002) third category, learning at work, define the learning organization as a place in which learning occurs not just in formal training courses, but through engaging in the work itself (Garvin 1993, 2000; Watkins and Marsick, Chapter 4 in this volume; Marquardt and Reynolds 1994; Watkins and Marsick 1993; Watkins and Marsick, Chapter 4 in this volume). For example, Watkins and Marsick (1993: 7–8) argue that “Training plays an important role in the learning organization, but training is not its sole distinguishing feature. [Instead], [l]earning is closely intertwined with daily work activities, and as a result, it may not stand out as separate from effective individual and organizational practices ... Learning is a continuous, strategically used process, integrated with, and running parallel to, work.” Garvin’s perspective too embodies a learning-in-action approach. Garvin (1998: 37), for instance, classifies organizational learning as a behavioral process that has “no independent existence apart from the work processes in which [it] appear[s]” but one that “profoundly affect[s] the form, substance, and character of work processes, by shaping how they are carried out.” Just as organizations have particular ways of making decisions and communicating as it pertains to work, they too have dominant modes of learning on-the-job (Garvin 1998). Indeed, many of Garvin’s (1993) building blocks, such as problem solving, learning from experience, and experimentation, relate directly to work itself.

Learning structures. Örtenblad’s (2002) fourth and final category, learning structure, consists of definitions of the learning organization that center around organizational structure. In particular, these conceptions tend to describe flat, decentralized organizations that are able to process information fast in order to sense and respond quickly to changes in their environment. For instance, Watkins and Marsick write that, “Information flows freely in a learning organization—among people, across boundaries, and through information and data processing systems” (1993: 258). In the same vein, Senge (1990: 287) described how, in the future, more and more organizations would become decentralized: “learning organizations will, increasingly, be ‘localized’ organizations, extending the maximum degree of authority and power as far from the ‘top’ or corporate center as possible.” While Garvin was largely agnostic about the form or structure of his learning organization, he hinted that, to be successful at acquiring, interpreting, and applying information learning, organizations would need to de-emphasize hierarchy, with managers not being teachers of others, but instead “shepherds” of others’ learning (2000: 190). Still, Garvin was less concerned about the structure of the learning organization itself than that it had world-class learning processes, a climate conducive to learning, and leadership that reinforced it (Garvin et al. 2008).

Distinctive Contributions of Garvin's Perspective

While Garvin's version of the learning organization possesses many similarities with those of other distinguished scholars, his conception is also distinct in ways that contribute to the broader literature. Of Garvin's many contributions, three stand out as particularly unique and impactful: (1) an emphasis on organizational learning processes, (2) concrete and accessible prescriptions for managers, and (3) a focus on local leaders and on ways for them to gauge the progress of their units.

A process perspective. While most other conceptions of the learning organization center on individual mindsets and disciplines (Senge 1990) or organizational capabilities (Marquardt and Reynolds 1994), Garvin's learning organization is unique in that it instead focuses on learning *processes*, which serve to unite multiple levels of analysis. As Garvin (1998: 34) put it, "past studies [of organizations and organizational learning] have tended to focus on either the trees (individual tasks or activities) or the forest (the organization as a whole), they have not combined the two. A process perspective provides the needed integration, ensuring that the realities of work practice are linked explicitly to the firm's overall functioning." Processes are the glue that connects individual and organizational learning and provide managers with a medium level of analysis to focus their efforts.

In addition, processes provide the means to describe how work actually gets done in organizations. As Garvin put it, "if organizations are 'systems for getting work done,' processes provide a fine-grained description of the means" (1998: 42). Instead of focusing on abstract concepts like "systems thinking," "personal mastery," or "team learning" (Senge 1990), Garvin believed managers' time would be better spent improving processes with which they were already familiar, such as problem solving or intelligence gathering. For Garvin, organizations became learning organizations through engaging in, and reflecting on, the work itself.

p. 82 In short, taking a process perspective to organizational behavior and learning "provides an integrated, dynamic picture of organizations and managerial behavior" (Garvin 1998: 33) that exclusively individual and organizational perspectives tend to miss.

Concrete and accessible prescriptions for action. Another strength of Garvin's learning organization is its accessibility. From his very first writings about the learning organization, Garvin sought to make the concept as concrete and digestible for managers as possible. In Garvin's view, prior discussions of the learning organization were far too abstract and idealistic to be useful to managers. As he put it, "the topic in large part remains murky, confused, and difficult to penetrate ... discussions of learning organizations have often been reverential and utopian, filled with near mystical terminology" (Garvin 1993: 71). In contrast, Garvin (1993: 79) believed that "learning organizations are built upon the gritty details of practice." By providing managers with a clear definition of the learning organization, five or six concrete learning processes on which to focus, and both formal and informal ways to measure progress, Garvin helps companies get started.

Focus on local leaders. Finally, while other conceptions of the learning organization target mainly high-level executives, Garvin's instead was aimed at local leaders—any and all managers who led projects, departments, divisions, or business units in which the real work of the organization got done. By providing managers a few key learning processes to focus on, recommendations on creating a culture conducive to learning, concrete suggestions for how to create learning opportunities, set the tone, and lead discussions, and a measurement tool to assess progress, Garvin hoped that organizations could increase learning at their greatest points of leverage—within work teams, where most organizational work occurred (Edmondson 2002, 2003). Garvin and colleagues designed the LOS with such a focus in mind to allow local leaders the ability to assess relative progress and build learning organizations (Garvin et al. 2008).

The Impact and Future of Garvin's Learning Organization

Garvin's conception of the learning organization has significantly impacted past research and, in all likelihood, will continue to influence future research and practice.

Impact of Garvin's Definition

p. 83 One, albeit imperfect, way to measure the impact of a scholar's work is by the number of citations it has received. According to Google Scholar, Garvin's 1993 *Harvard Business Review* article "Building a Learning Organization" had been cited almost 8,000 times as of January 2019. While this figure is still well below that of Senge (1990) (whose *Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* has been cited a whopping ↵ 57,000 times), it still ranks second ahead of the works of other distinguished learning organization researchers, such as Pedler et al. (1991), Watkins and Marsick (1993), and Marquardt and Reynolds (1994), indicating the influence of Garvin's perspective. Moreover, Garvin's 2000 book *Learning in Action* and 2008 follow-up article with Amy C. Edmondson and Francesca Gino "Is Yours a Learning Organization?" in *Harvard Business Review* have each been cited over 1,000 times, indicating that Garvin's ideas continue to significantly impact discussions of the learning organization.

The greater impact of Garvin's learning organization, however, has undoubtedly been on managers and organizations. Subsequent to the publication of his 1993 article, Garvin spoke with, consulted, and worked closely with a number of organizations, including General Electric, Warner Lambert, L.L. Bean, Mitsubishi, Mahindra and Mahindra, Harvard Business School Publishing, and many others to help them put his learning organization principles into practice. Garvin was particularly proud of his work with the US Forest Service. Based in large part on Garvin's work, the Forest Service established the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center in 2002, a body devoted to gathering information from past wildfires, analyzing the data, and applying it to fight fires more effectively—and safely—in the future. The Center's tagline "A lesson is learned when we change our behavior" clearly demonstrates Garvin's lasting impact.

The Future of Garvin's Learning Organization

Twenty-five years after Garvin's initial writings on the topic, the principles and practices of his learning organization still remain highly relevant. Organizations must still be able to spot errors and solve problems quickly to ensure smooth and effective implementation. They still need to be able to gather market intelligence, process and transfer information, and adopt the latest practices and technologies in order to avoid falling behind. And managers in today's organizations still need to be able to learn from past experiences and experiment in order to improve and innovate.

In fact, a number of trends suggest that the processes of Garvin's learning organization are even *more* important today than they were in 1993. For one, several studies have found that the intensity of competition and pace of technological change are both increasing, resulting in increased firm turnover. A 2016 study by Scott Anthony and colleagues at the consulting firm Innosight, for instance, found that corporations in the S&P 500 Index in 1965 stayed in the index for an average of 33 years (Anthony, Viguerie, and Waldeck 2016). By 1990, around the time that the learning organization was gaining popularity, average tenure in the S&P 500 had fallen to 20 years. In 2012, the figure had fallen to 18 years, and Innosight forecasts that it will shrink to 14 years by 2026. At the current rate of corporate churn, about half of the S&P 500 firms will be replaced over the next ten years. Other studies have found similar results (Govindarajan and Srivastava 2016; Reeves, Levin, and Ueda 2016). These studies, as well as countless case studies of fallen stars like Blockbuster, Kodak, and Sears, suggest that the ability to learn and adapt will be increasingly important in the future. Garvin's learning organization prescription ↵ can help firms to do so. As Garvin

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said in a 2008 interview with HBR, “products can be copied. Services can be copied. Even strategies can be copied ... but if you’re learning more rapidly than the competition, you can get ahead and stay ahead” (Garvin and Edmondson 2008).

In addition, as the amount of information grows exponentially every year, the ability to acquire, interpret, and apply information effectively becomes an even greater challenge—and source of competitive advantage for organizations that can do it well. According to one source, 90 percent of the data in the world was created in the past two years (Marr 2018). Given this fact, companies need not only the latest knowledge management tools, but a strategy and process for managing information and acting on it. Garvin’s learning organization provides one possible way forward.

Conclusion

Learning organizations cannot plan for all learning to occur. There will, of course, always be some element of serendipity to finding the correct solution to a problem, making improvements, or finding the next big innovative idea. Managers in Garvin’s learning organization recognize, however, that they can increase the amount, depth, and pace of learning by crafting and optimizing the organization’s learning processes. As Garvin (2000: xi) put it, “Learning will always remain something of an art, but even the best artists can improve their technique.” Learning organizations constantly work to craft their next masterpiece.

Acknowledgments

I thank Lynn Garvin for her insights into her late husband’s thinking on the learning organization.

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