

# **The Learning Organization - an Oxymoron?**

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## **Summary**

The term organization implies a hierarchy, which denotes boss/subordinate relationships. Such relationships are experienced by the subordinate as *discounts* the phenomenon of discounts reliably leading to revenge, freezing or withdrawal has been identified by observation of thousands of creative problem-solving/invention groups. Discounts arouse reactivity and half-heartedness. Half-heartedness is a handicap to learning/thinking, thus learning organization may be an oxymoron. This article explores the possibility of modifying the present model governing relationships.

The idea of the "Learning Organization" is currently both fashionable and relevant to the needs of business today. "If the rate of change internally is less than the external rate of change", says Jack Welch of G.E., "the end is in sight".

Yet there is an inherent contradiction between the nature of "organizations" (and the way they operate) and the Learning Process. Organizations are hierarchical structures which define the power and control relationships of the people involved. This method of structuring promotes obedience and defensiveness, and discourages learning.

The Process of Learning requires an environment or "field" which encourages experiment and the making of new connections. It is an emotionally risky process, since there is a good chance that experiments will "fail" and the trial connections will prove to be "wrong". In this respect, it is analogous to (perhaps identical with) the process of creative problem-solving, in which the normal hierarchical relationships and behaviors have to be suspended and replaced if the group is to be effective.

## **Unwritten Laws of Relationship**

From observation and analysis of thousands of creative problem-solving groups in business, it has become clear that the unwritten laws governing superior/subordinate relationships create a field that brings out the least in both parties. "Those who relate through coercion, or disregard for the other person, create negative energy" (Margaret Wheatley, 1994). The coercion or disregard does not have to be intentional—it is the perception of the recipient that is critical.

The vast majority of people in our culture are hypersensitive to criticism, discounting, being found wanting, rejection, etc.—far more so than is commonly appreciated. Discovery of this law began with an amusing incident. The group was trying to devise a new, loss-proof stopper for a wide-mouthed Thermos bottle.

About ten minutes into the session, one member jumped to his feet and said, "I think I've got it !" He waved a hand over the top of the sample Thermos bottle and said, "Suppose we took a thin sheet....."

Another member of the group, the only woman, interrupted to say, "That would be too expensive."

We observers were puzzled: how could she know it would be too expensive, if she did not know what the idea was ?

We later replayed the videotape. Earlier in the session, when the group was organizing itself to work on the problem, we found the answer to her later behavior. The man who had offered the "thin sheet" idea had said to the woman "Your handwriting is probably good, so why don't you be the note-taker for the group."

She had perceived this as a discount, she told us, relegating her to be secretary of the group. She was aware of that, but her "revenge" reaction came as a surprise to her.

### **Negative Reactions are Universal and Powerful**

At the time, I thought her reaction was perhaps a reflection of immaturity; a more mature person would not be so affected by an unintended discount. However, as we began to pay close attention to anything that might be perceived as a discount, we discovered that the negative reaction was all but universal— regardless of age or position. Usually there was some form of revenge, but on occasion, the discounted person simply withdrew from participation and support.

The next surprise was the great range of actions (or inactions) that were perceived as discounts. Any sort of slight or negative attention or lack of acknowledgment was enough to set the discount/revenge syndrome in motion. Given the unlimited opportunities for such unintended discounts in the everyday operations of businesses and other organizations, the extent of defensiveness and lack of commitment by employees is hardly surprising.

Another surprise was the power of the reactions. The response is totally disproportionate to the provocation, which is often (usually ?) unintended (as in the example given earlier). When a person feels discounted, they do their best to conceal any sign of its impact. However, by slowing the videotape replay it is possible to observe minute changes in expression and physical attitude, and it becomes clear that something significant has happened. It is likely that their next participation will be adversarial to the offender, even if that is destructive to the purpose of the meeting.

The remarkable force of even small discounts may derive from an unconscious connection to the survival response of fight or flight. Physical threat engages fight or flight reaction; emotional threat engages revenge or withdrawal. In addition, the discount is experienced as an expression of power by the discounter over the person discounted, which threatens their autonomy. Psychologists tell us that this threat strikes at one's fear of being meaningless and suffering annihilation. Whatever the

reason, the force and reliability of the discount response is impressive, once one is alerted to it.

### **The Effects on Relationships In a Hierarchy**

The significance of the Discount/Revenge syndrome goes far beyond relationships in meetings and creative sessions; it is the key to the long-term relationships between people in the organization. Relationships are the sum of the transactions between the two parties over time—the balance of positively-experienced and negatively-experienced transactions determines whether the relationship is constructive or destructive.

We are more aware of the consequences of careless transmissions in our more intimate relationships. A study of marriage relationships concluded that lasting marriages have at least five validating actions to one discount (John Gottman, 1994). Discounts include criticism, contempt, stonewalling and defensiveness.

Relationships in business, while not intimate, have the same sensitivity to discounts, although they are seldom overtly acknowledged. Certainly the sessions we studied bear this out. Most of the discounts we identified have in common the exercise of "power-over" and put the recipient in a one-down position. There seems to be an unconscious and underground rebellion against anyone who exercises power and control.

Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) outlines some very attractive ways for corporations to become more productive. His five "disciplines" are: Systems Thinking, Personal Mastery, Mental Modeling, Team Learning, and Building a Shared Vision. All except, perhaps Systems Thinking and Personal Mastery, depend for effectiveness upon relationships. Senge emphasizes that it will be necessary to avoid defensiveness, yet defensiveness seems inherent in most hierarchies.

### **Rational Sabotage**

In hierarchical structures, where it would be imprudent to get obvious revenge on a superior, attacks are carried out with great care to avoid retaliation. Subordinates develop a stunning repertoire of hidden revenges, many of them outside of their own awareness. They may take the form of questions, counter-proposals, careful interruptions to point out the flaw in an idea—a host of socially acceptable techniques of "rational sabotage". These actions need not even be directed at the superior to get revenge on him. By correcting a peer or subordinate in a meeting, one can bring out defensiveness and caution, and effectively blight the productivity of the group.

Rational sabotage and competitiveness are the normal practices in most organizations. The governing field is adversarial and defensive, as is typically created by the exercise of power-over and control. Few superiors manage relationships to achieve a

collaborative field, not through perversity, but because they are not aware of the pervasive influence of the "law" of Discount/Revenge.

In hierarchies, relationships are automatically defined by the structure. Most superiors and subordinates attempt to have friendly relationships, but the friendliness tends to be superficial. Intimacy beyond the camaraderie of bowling or baseball is considered inappropriate, and exchanges at work tend to be governed by power relationships.

When we observed meetings involving three levels of hierarchy, we could identify the differences in behavior in the same individual dealing with a boss or a subordinate. The different behaviors are identified in the table below:

**Ways of Dealing**

<b>With Subordinate</b>		<b>With Superior</b>	
brusque	authoritative	deferential	subservient
condescending	contradicts	respectful	quick agreement
corrects	impatient	suggests	tentative
interrupts	questions	listens intently	patient
talks to	judgmental	willing to give	good humored
positive	relaxed	tactful	tense
expresses anger	sarcastic	shows no anger	checks understanding
blames	wins	accepts	loses

**Emotional Absence - and Emotional Presence**

While rational sabotage is an important way of reacting to power-over and control, a second area of "revenge" is so widespread and common we are hardly aware of it. When circumstances make a person subject to the bidding of others, his revenge may be to become half-hearted. He "puts in his time", and that is all. By eliminating power and control, and the discounts inherent in its exercise, this situation can be transformed from emotional absence to wholehearted involvement.

For example, in a plant with hundreds of small production lines repairing electronic devices, the lines were averaging 50 per cent of "standard", with a high proportion of rejections. Twelve lines were selected for an experiment. The eight women on each line were taught a problem-solving and relationship management process, and given the responsibility to improve their productivity.

In the plant hierarchy, there was one supervisor for every four lines. On every experimental line, the women's first request was that their supervisor be removed. Their second was that the quality control man be barred from personally returning rejections - they had been making disparaging comments.

Then the teams focused on their own performance and interactions. Within three months they had reduced rejections to virtually zero, and had increased production by 300 per cent - substantially over standard.

Similar examples are reported by Ricardo Semler (*Maverick*, 1993) and Tom Melohn (*The New Partnership*, 1993). Semler, a Brazilian CEO, systematically gave more power and control to the rank and file in his company, thereby reducing the discount factor. His company grew 600 per cent in the first ten years of his continuing experiment.

Tom Melohn, gave himself the title of Head Sweeper, and methodically changed the field of the small manufacturing plant he purchased, from the traditional hierarchy to a system of high authority, respect and responsibility for each employee. His results are impressive: After twelve years, sales up 28% each year, pre-tax profit up 2400%, R.O.I. at a rate equal to some in the top 10% of the Fortune 500, productivity up 480%.

All these stories illustrate how a change from Power-over to Power-sharing brings out participative learning that replaces self-defensive maneuvers. Exceptional things begin to happen. The increases in productivity are not mysterious or unusual. Whenever relationships are managed to reduce or eliminate the discount factor inherent in hierarchical power and control, a remarkable energy for learning and growth is released.

Many managers are aware of the benefits of wholehearted involvement. They attempt to get more of it through various reward systems such as stock or ownership sharing, bonuses, recognition programs and the like. At first, these extrinsic rewards seem to have some effect, but the results are only temporary, and negative attitudes return in full force, precisely because the rewards are another form of control! (see Alfie Kohn, *Rewards are Punishing*, 1993).

Moreover, extrinsic rewards distract attention from the real area of opportunity: the intrinsic rewards of mastering the process of collaboration and learning together. The programs that make a real difference are those that change the field from one of power-over and control to one that brings into being individual feelings of competence, meaningfulness and autonomy.

### **Anxiety and Learning**

Fundamental to all learning is the step of connecting to form a combined picture that was not there before. Independently taking the step of connecting to make my own meaning feels risky—there is a good chance that my connection will turn out to be "wrong". The learning process is one of successive approximation, with many more "failures" than "successes" (we speak of learning by "trial and error"). The socializing practices of our culture make mistakes quite punishing. When I am about to make a new connection, my anxiety is likely to rise. In a competitive, or adversarial field, the

risk increases, and my anxiety may be such that I do not attempt to make the connection. I wait for an authority to tell me—I wait to be taught. I slip into a passive role and tend to become emotionally absent.

Conversely, making my own connections, finding out for myself, generates an internal sensation of satisfaction, a tiny spurt of endorphin, and feelings of validation. It is exciting and energizing, and encourages my continuing involvement.

### **Toward an Acceptable Hierarchy**

Hierarchical and controlling relationships are the rule in our culture, and they have been so productive of progress and order that it is difficult to imagine any alternative. Common sense tells me that without control we will move towards chaos—a frightening prospect.

Yet there do exist models of hierarchy and control which are not shot with discounts traveling downward, creating defensiveness, hidden hostility and covert reaction. They have in common a field that is qualitatively different from the traditional hierarchical superior/subordinate relationship. It is characterized by an absence of power-over transmissions and a presence of intense mutuality. We see it in invention groups and other hot teams where the group focus is not only on a goal, but also on the details of the process of getting there. The progress is rich with stories. Every member is on the “grapevine” and formal communication is unnecessary. There is self-respect in the crackle of positive energy that is generated by the problem-solving, the connecting, the mutual appreciation and regard.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in microcosm when the boss as chairman of a meeting decides to act as a facilitator (a communications traffic controller) and take no part in the content of the meeting—or delegates his authority over the process of the meeting to someone else, subjecting himself to their control and freeing himself to participate on the same terms as the other members of the meeting. Traditional meetings are such a tortuous way to accomplish anything because most chairpeople use their power over the process to manipulate the content of the meeting to suit their own ends, thereby creating a field that generates the rational sabotage and emotional absence described above.

In these examples the leader of the invention team and the facilitator of the meeting manage interactions but do not attempt to control autonomy, rather, they encourage initiative and original contributions. They create a field that brings out the best in the participants.

These examples suggest that it is possible to retain the structural and directional benefits of hierarchy without generating the Discount/Revenge syndrome. The answer is not to eliminate hierarchy, but to use the strengths of established organizations to promote mutation into forms that foster individual accomplishment and group synergy.

## **An Alternative Model for Creating a Learning Organization**

The history of civilization provides a model for doing this. "The advance of civilization has consisted in creating small, protected areas of existence where competition and danger are minimized, where we can temporarily feel safe and relax our guard" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1994, P. 32). The approach in organizations would be to create many small protected fields—groups that generate learning environments that can lead to new thinking. "Acting locally is a sound strategy for changing large systems...work with the system you know, one you can get your arms round...little by little, system by system,...develop enough momentum to change the larger society" (Wheatley, 1994, P. 42 ).

Since 1960 we have trained many invention groups to manage their interactions to bring out their best thinking. Although these groups are effective in developing new ideas and alternative options for solving problems, the skills in relationship management that were so effective as the group worked together, were seldom retained subsequently. We still needed a way to help people internalize the skills of synergy, so that they could use them on an everyday basis.

Over the last few years, working with a psychotherapist and many experimental groups, I believe we have now developed ways of achieving that objective. MindFree groups, as we have come to call them, focus on relationships and the ways of behaving that ensure that fields are harmonious and inspire mutual appreciation, collaboration and joyful accomplishment.

As we experimented with group after group, certain essentials emerged. First it was critical to establish each participant as his or her own connection-maker. "Teaching", that is, making connections *for* people, was ineffective for real understanding.

Next we needed to help each individual overcome competitive strategies of listening and responding. There seems to be a genetic imperative to "read" each other to determine superiority or inferiority, and then maneuver to be superior or at least respectable. We had to create a situation where superior/inferior was not an issue, so that participants could let down their guard and stop relying on expressions of strength to gain or maintain status. We tried to establish that everyone deserved equal respect as a person, and was not to be discounted in any way.

We positioned ourselves not as facilitators or trainers but as players. We were in the group to learn more about the skills of synergy, like everyone else - we were participants. Because we had prior experience, we could coach where appropriate, but we attempted to exercise no power-over. We introduced the law of Discount/Revenge and its effect on fields very early. Everyone has plenty of experience of feeling discounted, and instantly understands the concept of fields, so these are effective self-

teaching tools. We used video feedback to examine transmissions and discover their impact on openness and availability.

We established equal respect by getting to know each other in depth, and appreciating that as human beings we have much in common. By agreeing to confidentiality, and modeling storytelling about our early lives, it becomes possible to be open about our successes and our failures, without fear that the disclosures will be used as power-over ammunition. Members of the group can talk freely about matters that are important to them in their journey of self-discovery.

### **Thinking Together**

The unique way of relating that is developed in MindFree groups demonstrates the enormous power of the group mind, when the many faces of power-over and competition are systematically examined and eliminated. This experience of self-discovery and learning allows individuals to change their perception of themselves in relation to others. They practice a mutuality and respect that rekindles the exhilaration of connecting wholeheartedly to build new meanings—the exhilaration of true learning.

Thinking to learn is traditionally an individual and private practice. I do it in my own way, and if I wish to look my best, before being spoken, my thinking needs to be ordered; confusions and uncertainties cleared up, and everything polished before being displayed—the demanding activity of “impression management”.

The process of MindFree reframes the notion of “looking my best”. I look my best, and am of most use to my partners in thinking, when I disclose myself as I really am: somewhat confused, uncertain, disordered and unpolished—in the process of becoming.

When we are able to manage the anxiety of dealing with each other on this level, thinking is transformed into a group process. When you are articulating your unfolding thinking, I am open, undefended and connecting with it to build an empathic understanding, and a further thought that neither of us had before. When there are several of us, it is like having a gigantic common brain of enormous power and reach.

In this rare and joyous state, we can manage the complexity needed to deal with great problems and opportunities. It requires the difficult combining of the richness of our differences with willfully accordant insights, to integrate them into a harmonious new idea or understanding.

### **Contagious Behavior**

Harmonious relationships are contagious. Just as the exercise of power begets counter moves of retaliation, harmonious relationships inspire mutual appreciation, collaboration and joyful accomplishment. When these are common enough, they invite imitation, and become a significant force for change. They can percolate back into the mainstream,

and begin to mutate the traditional exercise of power. The organization's capacity for accomplishment is multiplied.

### **A Structure to Foster Synergy**

Our vision is to install many of these thinking/learning groups, paralleling the traditional hierarchical organization. Membership would be voluntary, and everyone would have the opportunity to participate. The groups would be given places to meet and time to have a weekly meeting

Their assignment would be to discover together their best ways of thinking and interacting, and to practice these skills with each other. After they have made some progress, they may be given (or they may identify) problems or opportunities to work on, but these tasks would be secondary. They are *Learning* groups, not Task Forces or Project Teams or Change Teams; their primary assignment is to develop processes and practices that create fields of synergy and learning.

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