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Book Review (by James Hever)
of

The Power of Learning — A Guide to Gaining Competitive Advantage
Mayo, A. & Lank, E. 1994, Institute of Personnel Development, London.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this book were colleagues at ICL. Mayo now practices in the United Kingdom as a consultant on organisational learning, while Lank is responsible for knowledge management at ICL.

The book attempts a comprehensive exploration of critical issues and tactics for any organisation seeking to become a learning organisation, defined by the authors as one which ‘... harnesses the full brainpower, knowledge and experience available to it, in order to evolve continually for the benefit to all its stakeholders’ (p. viii). The purpose of the book as explicated by the authors is ‘to provide a means of benchmarking your organisation against a mature Learning Organisation’ (p. 7). As a statement of purpose, it is open to question because the authors provide no account of how they derived their profile or the constitutive elements of ‘a mature Learning Organisation’. By implication, the reader is asked to take it on trust that they know.

CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The roles played in creating a learning organisation by leadership, language and culture, supportive processes, information technology, personal learning, teams and networks are each discussed in individual chapters. These chapters provide stimulating discussion on what ought to be done in each area if an organisation is to become a learning organisation. Throughout each chapter, text boxes labelled as ‘Powerpoints’ provide questions for the reader to ask about his/her organisation. Each chapter ends with ‘Pointers for Action’, which are tactics to be implemented in each critical area to transform any organisation into a learning organisation.

Three additional chapters provide a kind of polemic arguing for the necessity of becoming a learning organisation, stating in effect that the power of learning, and of valuing learning, is the essence of success. These three chapters are replete with generalisations that at times constitute a kind of ‘wisdom literature’, but sometimes descend to the level of truism. The reader is told, for example, that the essence of organisational learning consists in learning how to exploit previous successes and avoid repeating previous failures and that, in turn, this may create additional revenues. The argument is undeniable, but somehow is too general to be specifically applicable.

An appendix is provided entitled ‘The Complete Learning Organisation Benchmark’. This is a kind of index or audit, drawing together all the questions from each section of individual chapters. It attempts to guide the reader through a weighting and scoring

exercise of his/her organisation. Marks out of a possible 1,000 indicate to what extent one's organisation matches the blueprint of a learning organisation. The book contains a wealth of ideas, questions and exercises that lead the reader through the details and implementation processes required for becoming a learning organisation. The breadth of topics addressed raises *en passant* truly critical issues in managing and rewarding the learning of employees. One chapter alone addresses all of the following critical HR issues:

- Performance management and feedback
- Defining learning plans
- Role descriptions
- Selection for roles
- Induction
- Resource management
- Career management
- Monetary rewards
- Non-monetary rewards
- Opinion surveys
- Skills planning

SOME ISSUES

Unfortunately, however stimulating the ideas, the book fails in what it apparently sets out to achieve. The subtitle describes the book as 'a guide to achieving competitive advantage'. It would seem reasonable, therefore, to expect a convincing exposé of causal links between competitive advantage and the learning organisation. This is essential if the book is to provide an argument that is in anyway compelling for organisational leaders. None is provided. Equally disappointing, the authors provide no thematic treatment of what constitutes competitive advantage, or of how it is to be understood in the context of their discussion. Significantly, 'competitive advantage' does not appear in the book's index, although this writer was able to find thirteen references to 'competitive advantage' in relation to the learning organisation. However, the term is used repeatedly in an undefined sense bordering on the clichéic. The authors say, for example, that they are convinced 'that the essence of survival and competitive advantage is to be found in the reality of the Learning Organisation'. Perhaps the reader should be warned when reading on the second page of the preface (p. viii) the following declaration:

In this book we are not so interested in the precise definition of terms or the development of conceptual models.

The authors attempt too much in seeking to provide a discussion on all aspects of becoming a learning organization, in a little over two hundred pages.

At a more fundamental level, behind the failure of this book to make its case convincingly, stands the same reason for a similar failure by Peter Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*. Mayo, Lank and indeed Senge ask too much of the business practitioner

whether CEO, HR director or entrepreneur. It is too much to ask that an act of faith be made in an aspiration, a prototype, an ideal, such as that of the learning organisation without a rigorous business case being made. Thus, the very first questions asked of business leaders are:

Does your organisation have a template describing the characteristics of the kind of Learning Organisation it would like to be?

Does your organisation have a framework and a plan for practical implementation to achieve the desired state?

(Mayo & Lank 1994, p. 8)

Top management will be easily excused in replying that they are too busy with more important things. The idealistic definition of the learning organisation already cited remains vague, normative and aspirational. It is doubtful if business leaders will be motivated, much less compelled to mobilise resources for such an aspiration.

Of course it is not a question that aspirations do not have their place in organisational life: claiming competitive advantage for them, however, demands cogent argumentation. A business case can be made if alternatively the focus is placed on learning *per se*, on organisational learning as a dynamic business activity related to developing and sustaining organisational capability. Elsewhere this writer has presented an examination of the links between competitive advantage and learning in organisations (Hever 2000, p. 15). In summary they can be stated as follows:

- Human resources can deliver sustainable competitive advantage when developing organisational capability especially for innovation.
- To achieve this, the strategic management of these resources must include a strategy to differentiate them from those of the competition by acquiring and sustaining leading edge competencies that continue to add value and contribute to developing core competences.
- An organisational learning focus is essential to achieve this differentiation, and may be the only way to achieve competitive advantage.
- Organisational learning itself must have a competitive focus.
- Competitive advantage can only be sustained by constant competitive learning.

A focus on organisational learning then, would ask business leaders two very different questions to begin with:

Have you identified the knowledge (applied learning) that contributes most to the bottom line of your organisation and to that of your leading competitors?

Have you plans to capture, share and enhance that knowledge to beat your competitors consistently?

Presented from this perspective, top management would find it considerably more difficult to identify other more important issues with which to concern themselves.

REFERENCES

Hever, J. 2000, 'Organisational Learning and the Search for Sustainable Competitive Advantage', paper submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration, University of Southern Queensland.

Mayo, A & Lank, E. 1994, *The Power of Learning*, Institute of Personnel Management, London.

Senge, P. M. 1990, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Century Business.