

THE YOUNG ENDEAVOUR: SAILING A LEARNING ORGANISATION

by

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INTRODUCTION

I was recently invited to be a guest on board the sail-training ship, the *Young Endeavour*. Although I would not be considered to be a young Australian, I participated in a ten day adventure at sea as part of my research on learning organisations. I used the voyage to investigate the nature of organisational learning on a tall ship that uses an outward bound type program to develop initiative, leadership, teamwork and personal growth in young Australians. I acted as a participant/observer although some would say that I acted more like a tourist. In order to understand what was going on, I collected various documents, interviewed key participants and took field notes about what I observed on board.

The *Young Endeavour* is a training ship. Metaphorically, it can be regarded as a learning organisation. The purpose of this paper is to discuss two issues that arose during the voyage about viewing a training ship as a learning organisation. The issues are concerned with 1) identifying some observable features of a learning organisation, and 2) recognising the centrality of a person's identity to each learning experience.

BACKGROUND

The *Young Endeavour* is a training ship. It is a university of the sea that attempts to enhance the life skills of youth crew through the mastery of sailing a tall ship. It is a gift from the people of Great Britain. On January 13, 1985, the prime minister of Great Britain wrote to the Australian prime minister to confirm Britain's decision to present a specially commissioned sail-training ship to the people of Australia as a gift to commemorate Australia's forthcoming Bicentenary in 1988. This unique gift supported a government priority to young Australians by offering them an adventure under sail.

To date, over 4000 young males and females between the ages of 16 and 23 have participated as youth crew on ten day voyages that are conducted between various ports from Cairns to Hobart on the eastern seaboard and Adelaide in the mid-West. The *Young Endeavour* does not cover ports between Adelaide, Perth and Darwin because the sail-training ship *Leeuwin* provides similar ten day voyages in these waters. The *Young Endeavour* has also provided one-day trips for over 3000 young people with disabilities and has been the radio/communications relay ship for a number of Sydney to Hobart yacht races, including the disastrous 1998 campaign.

The ten day program that I was involved with began in Cairns and finished in Mackay. Twenty-four youth crew were taken on board in Cairns (12 male and 12 female). They paid for the opportunity to participate. The training objective for the voyage was to provide the youth crew with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to safely take charge of and sail the ship for a period of twenty-four hours. As a learning organisation, the ship and its crew focussed on the task of getting the 24 youth crew to take control and sail the ship from Broken Island on the northern end of the Whitsunday group of islands, to Mackay. The nine permanent crew from the Royal Australian Navy took a passive role in this final stage. While the training schedule focussed primarily on this transfer of responsibility to the youth crew, the associated objectives were to develop initiative, leadership, teamwork and personal growth.

SAILING A LEARNING ORGANISATION

There is a growing interest in the concept of the learning organisation and the concept has a particular strategic relevance for trainers involved with human resource development (HRD) activities. A sail-training ship offers a unique experience using an outward-bound type methodology where the context, content and processes of learning are confined to the thoughts, conversations and activities that take place on board during a prescribed period of time. This means that trainers have the full undivided attention of participants for an uninterrupted period of time.

In simplistic terms, all organisations learn and stimulate learning. But how can organisations learn? Only individuals learn. We must remember that the concept of a 'learning organisation' is generally regarded as a metaphor to identify and highlight certain features of an organisation or group of people that are desirable for promoting the potential for growth and development. In this sense, organisational learning is collective learning expressed in terms of those outcomes that emerge through sharing ideas, knowledge, tasks and purposes. These outcomes are generally not possible by one individual acting alone. Similarly, culture is a term used to illustrate the results of collective, rather than individual action.

The current definitions of a learning organisation are many and somewhat varied and they contain a number of loose statements about organisations transforming themselves, about empowered employees, about quality collaboration, about lots of innovations, and about accelerating individual and group learning. The definitions identify desirable ideals rather than a checklist of 'must have's'.

Senge (1992) defines it as an environment or a culture "... where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 1). The culture that is prescribed for such an organisation is based on a range of attributes that are both implicit and explicit in the literature. The major attributes centre around the recognition that effective learning needs to be valued and rewarded, a strong commitment to the generation and transference of new knowledge, the adoption of systems thinking, the empowerment of employees, the development of autonomous self-sufficient teams, a shared vision, and perceived personal

mastery of learning (Mattsson and Millett, 1996). Just to reiterate, these are ideals that organisations can strive for in their own search for the future.

Sailing a learning organisation? The thought seems a bit odd, but it raises a number of immediate points from being on board a training facility. Getting the ship from Cairns to Mackay safely is an important but secondary agenda. The primary agenda is the growth and development of the 24 youth crew as they learn to sail the ship by themselves. So learning is quite apparent physically and conversationally. But at Mackay, the youth crew leave and another contingent arrive and so the trainees come and go. They bring their own experiences on board and they leave, each absorbing the training experience in his or her own unique way. The first point is what is the real impact of the training program? It is an age-old question for trainers.

The question that I put to the Captain on a number of occasions is the same question that all trainers grapple with: how effectively are the learning outcomes from this program transferred to the local community? How do the youth crew make Australia a better place? While organisational learning is concerned with the diffusion of knowledge and competencies across the organisational context, there is a wider context — the diffusion across society in general. Although this is a contentious point, a training venue and program is of little value unless it can transfer learning outcomes to other systems of action such as workplace, home, and sport. In management training, for example, outdoor and other off-site programs are often criticised for not transferring what has been learnt back to the workplace.

The skills of sailing a tall ship do not have a lot of demand for most people. What are the real transferables, the real connectors between different systems of action or the different areas of normal activity that a participant is involved with? The voyage program listed initiative, leadership, teamwork, and personal development as particular objectives. However, we had a deal of discussion on board as to the achievement of these objectives and their transferability. In training programs, do we accept responsibility for these types of objectives, or do we change the objectives to suit what are more realistic sets of expectations?

Different systems of action and areas of involvement are constructed on the basis of their own enduring sets of purposes and functions. People come and go. One young married lady had her own reasons for being on board and I often wonder how her experiences affected her normal life. One of the trainers recounted a phone call from a parent of a previous participant. The parent felt indebted to the Navy crew for the remarkable change that had taken place with the boy who was 'out of control' before the cruise.

HRD facilities need to assist participants to make connections between their training activities and their normal life activities. They also need to assist participants in seeing their potential for future success. Such training activities are very much about developing self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The navy crew take a very serious view of participant evaluations. But even with these evaluations, it is difficult to measure the real impact. The results of the surveys show overwhelming support for the program. At the end of the day, the real impact is unknown and

evidence of some of it arrives in various forms. The following quote by one voyage participant is indicative of the intensity of the experience that can occur in a training program:

I came aboard to sort out my mixed up mind and the calming winds and serenity of the sea have silenced the screaming voices of disillusionment that have echoed in my brain. But besides all of that I have learnt something greater and that is that there are many scary things in life, but true joy can only come if you work hard, be brave and conquer the demons. Then the exhilaration is amazing. Thanks for leading the way.

The effectiveness of the training evaluations leads to the second point: how good are the permanent crew generally and the trainers specifically at learning about themselves? It is obvious that training facilities become overly focused on what and how their participants should learn. How good are they at coping with single loop, (generating and dealing with new experiences in accordance with clear training objectives and guidelines) double loop, (acting on and challenging the experiences and objectives of the training program) and deutero-learning and development? Argyris and Schon (1978) relate single-loop, double-loop and deutero-learning to different activities that occur within organisations. They explain that:

Organisational learning involves the detection and correction of error. When the error detected and corrected permits the organisation to carry on its present policies or achieve its present objectives, then that error-detection-and-correction process is single-loop learning. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organisation's underlying norms, policies and objectives ... When an organisation engages in deutero-learning its members learn about previous contexts for learning. They reflect on and inquire into previous episodes of organisational learning, or failure to learn. They discover what they did that facilitated or inhibited learning, they invent new strategies for learning, they produce these strategies, and they evaluate and generalise what they have produced. (pp. 3-4)

The *Young Endeavour* provided an excellent theatre for individual and organisational development — the sort of living theatre that is often lacking in educational establishments such as universities. The navy crew were experienced at their tasks. At the end of each voyage, they spent a deal of time debriefing each training program. The three watch leaders in particular played a key role in the debriefing as they were the main trainers through their role of being personally responsible for a team of eight of the youth crew. Other navy crew play various roles to support a wide range of activities that the youth crew participated in. When the ship docked back in Sydney, the head of the *Young Endeavour* organisation held a specific review of all aspects of the operation to challenge whether the team was meeting the expectations of participants, of government, of the navy, and of other interested stakeholders.

THE CENTRALITY OF A PERSON'S IDENTITY

I was constantly witnessing the identity crisis on board. There was a sense of continuity and stability in the ship's identity because the ten-day voyages had evolved since 1988 and the naval crew mapped the rules of the game quite clearly. And besides, we were in the hands of the Royal Australian Navy, an institution with a proud tradition. The youth crew struggled with

the interaction between their personal identity and why they were on board and what they were doing on board. Most people were seasick after the first two days confronting the swell in the Coral Sea. They were also confronting the fear of heights, the discomfort of close living, the daily routine of cleaning toilets, and tiredness from changing watches covering the 24 hours of each day.

On the third day, the ship anchored off the James Cook University's research station on Opheus Island. The calm waters instantly changed their feelings. However, they were still wary of this life at sea. They had come on board for an adventure. I asked one young lady why she was on board. She raved on that it was her mother's idea. She lived in Sydney and didn't need additional friends, wasn't particularly into sailing and so it when on. I got the impression that she was not very positive about the voyage at this mid-way point so I asked her would she come on a future voyage. "Of course", was the instant response.

Contention and ambiguity are difficult things to deal with, but they are part of life and a vital part of learning. A number of other youth crew also expressed paradoxical statements about themselves and the ship. Some of the naval crew also were ready to move on even though they love the life and their roles associated with the *Young Endeavour*. I am convinced that significant learning and development takes place in the context of identity crisis and identity alignment. The identity crisis reflects the competing values that stimulate contention as an individual struggles to align his or her personal identity (who am I and what am I doing here) with group/organisational identity (collective purpose, regimentation, roles, rules, conformity, creativity). Organisational learning is about connecting individual learning and individual identity to group learning and group identities. Identity alignment is the process where individuals reassure themselves that there is consistency, relevancy and even potential in what they are doing.

Training facilities need to consider strategies for stimulating identity crisis to set the scene for significant learning to occur by challenging the comfort zones of participants. They need to develop strategies that align people with their collective pursuits and responsibilities. Organisational learning is about building bridges and connecting people for creative and rewarding synergies.

In the first few days in the Coral Sea, the sea was rough and many preferred to be ill on deck rather than suffering any further by being below. When a number of the navy crew were ill also, the visitors knew it wasn't a leisurely cruise on some pristine lake in the Austrian Alps. The thoughts were readable. How do I get off this thing? Who told me to get on in the first place?

Upon reflection, the first two days, whether by fate or deliberate management, provided a great start to a training adventure. It put participants in an unsettled state of mind as to what they were doing on board and what they really wanted to achieve from the voyage. It resembled a classic boot camp experience. Unsettle everyone in the first phase with a little disorientation so you have less baggage to deal with when you get into the training program seriously. In boot camp terms, this means when all the rebellion has been literally belted out of

the civilian recruits, the army is well placed to make soldiers out of them with a solid indoctrination process.

I am not suggesting that the navy employed the same tactics on the *Young Endeavour*. My point is that the first few days were personally challenging for many and acted as a crisis to their own identity. I believe it provided a useful platform to enable the trainers, referred to as watch leaders, to help the youth crew to quickly come to terms with what was required to get the job done.

As with some other training venues, the ship provides a unique context and setting for learning. People change, but the ship remains intact. For the youth crew, it is a temporary address that can act as a distinct advantage for any training program. People need to be taken away from their safe and familiar patterns of action to a transition zone where they can clear the way to understand and learn about themselves and prepare for change when they resume their roles in old and new systems of action.

CONCLUSION

The trick of sailing is not the mastery of the ropes, rudders, sheets or sails, but the patience, respect, professionalism, initiative and optimism that sailors take from ship to ship, campus to campus, workplace to workplace. The trick for trainers is to develop all sorts of ships and build the planks between them. The trick is to learn the trick and achieve the sort of feedback that one watch leader received:

A person is changed by the books they read and the people they meet. You are one person who is having a big impact on the lives of so many. A person's success is only a measure of their dreams. You have taught me how to dream again. A single comment can change a person. You have the ability and the dream to assist us in our self discovery.

In management training, we can learn a lot from what the *Young Endeavour* does for the youth crew. Paradoxically, the rapid pace of change locks us into stable and regular patterns of activity and coping behaviours. We need to take our people out of their organisations occasionally to reflect, have fun, take a deep breath and, with some new resolutions about the future, rejoin the fray with new enthusiasm.

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