CONTINUOUS LEARNING: A LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Governments are competing for citizens' discretionary income, support, and cooperation; and government employees need to learn continuously if they are to adapt and respond to the changing demands of increasingly sophisticated citizens. Through learning, local governments will be able to absorb change without crisis.

This report offers a definition of learning, and a discussion of the nature of adult learning. To build an environment for continuous learning, nine leadership strategies are presented.

The report provides twenty-seven broad concepts for how to implement a policy of continuous learning in local government; most of these concepts are broken into smaller ideas that government managers can implement in their jurisdictions. Ideas range from including evaluations of personal commitment to learning as an element of employee performance reports to developing learning partnerships with other organizations. Two appendixes address a specific learning experience in Brea, California.

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See inside back cover for list of recent IQ Service reports.

Continuous Learning: A Leadership Challenge

The author of this report is Frank Benest, city manager of Palo Alto, California, and formerly city manager of Brea, California. He holds a doctorate in education from Brigham Young University and has long been a popular presenter for the ICMA University. This report is excerpted from Benest's book, Commit to Learn—Transforming Government from the Inside Out.

PROMOTING EMPLOYEE LEARNING— AN OVERVIEW

A Definition of Learning

There are many ways to define learning in the workplace. One definition of learning in an organizational context is that learning is a change in behavior or organizational members based on experience.

The definition suggests that experience changes one's belief or assumptions. Changed beliefs or different assumptions lead one to modify behavior. Thus, experience drives learning. And, changed behavior is THE sign of learning.

Unfortunately, learning often suffers from the images of "schooling." Thus, we associate learning with classrooms, teachers, books, note taking, mandatory attendance, and tests with right and wrong answers. However, as opposed to the distinct event of schooling, learning is a lifelong process that occurs in a messy, complicated environment called life. There are many right answers and right ways, but few perfect solutions in our complex world.

To get a better feel for properly defining learning in an organizational context, let us identify a variety of learning activities. In the workplace, one can learn from many activities such as:

- Having challenging work
- Reflecting on experience
- Customer relationships
- Field trips
- Visits to other public and private organizations
- Debriefings
- Cross-training
- Job rotation, job enrichment, job enhancement
- General or specialized education programs
- Colleague feedback
- Skills training classes
- Networking
- Research
- Pilot-testing ideas
- Teaching, mentoring, coaching
- Facilitating groups
- Citizen participation activities.

Three Distinctions

To help better define learning, let us make three distinctions.

Distinction 1—Information vs. Knowledge. We often confuse information and knowledge. Information is facts and data, which may or may not have relevance. Knowledge has meaning and leads to changed behavior.

Distinction 2—Training vs. Learning. As is evident from the list of learning activities identified above, training is only one of many potential sources of learning. Unfortunately, training often does not lead to meaningful knowledge or changed behavior. In fact, the impact of training is often fleeting. The "half-life" of training is said to be three days. In other words, if one goes to a training class and then does not consciously reflect on the content or talk with others about the content, or act upon it, then half the content from the training is lost in three days, and another half of the half is lost in the next three days, and so on, until the training results in little or no consequence.

As opposed to training, learning is a more robust notion that leads to changed beliefs and behaviors and individual growth. In an organizational context, continuous learning by organizational members on differ-

ent fronts eventually leads to organizational renewal. While training (like schooling) is other-directed, true learning is self-directed and self-motivated.

Distinction 3—Organizational Learning vs. Individual Learning. These two approaches are end points along a continuum:

Experiential Learning in Brea

In 1989, the city of Brea, California, was confronted with a day worker problem. Every day 35 to 45 day workers (mostly newly arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America) gathered at a key intersection in Brea soliciting casual work from contractors and interested homeowners. The residents in the area vociferously complained that they did not like the day workers congregating in the neighborhood; businesspeople claimed that day workers were blocking driveways and driving away customers; and the police were concerned about traffic safety problems. Of course, there was little community sympathy for these immigrant laborers who were "illegals."

So, what was the knee-jerk reaction by residents, businesspeople, and city officials? Simply stated, "Get rid of them!" And, how was the city going to get rid of the day workers? The city, of course, should direct the police to move them away from the street corner and neighborhood.

Because the city manager, as well as local ministers and some residents, felt that using police in such a manner could easily tear the community apart and would not be effective in resolving the problems, the city manager with the concurrence of the city council formed a task force. The task force consisted of neighborhood residents, nearby businesspeople, day workers, and representatives from the Ministerial Association, Chamber of Commerce, the county Human Relations Commission, and police, planning, and community services departments. As a first step, bilingual staff and volunteers reached out to the neighborhood, interviewing residents, merchants, and the day workers. The task force members learned a lot:

- Everyone (from residents to day workers) feared everyone else. Given their experiences in their home countries, the day workers especially feared government officials.
- A big problem was that the new arrivals did not share the cultural norms of the neighborhood (e.g., they did not recognize that littering or urinating in the bushes was unacceptable).
- The day workers were very courageous, having traveled in some cases many thousands of miles by bus or on foot to arrive in California.
- The new arrivals exhibited a tremendous work ethic, willing to work many jobs.
- The day workers were very family oriented, sending most of their earnings home to help their family members.

The task force members then visited other southern California communities experiencing a day worker issue. Based on this research, the task force concluded that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) could not help. Passing an ordinance against soliciting day work from the street was ineffectual, if not also legally suspect. Finally, using police to concentrate on the problem was expensive; day workers would just move to another street corner; and heavy-handed police enforcement could easily polarize the community.

After the task force conducted several community forums on the issue, it recommended that the city create the Brea Job Center. The city would place a modular unit on vacant land owned by the redevelopment agency. Supervised by a part-time city staff person, the job center would create a regulated, orderly environment off the city streets, where contractors and homeowners desiring casual laborers could link up with day workers. In addition to job matching, the proposed job center would offer English-as-a-second-language courses and community survival skills classes (e.g., classes on acceptable cultural practices or the process for opening a bank account).

The job center proposal was discussed at a public hearing. All 13 speakers supported the task force recommendation, which then the city council unanimously supported. The pilot project was a success. It has now been in operation for over a decade, attracting national attention and acclaim.

Addressing the day worker challenge was a tremendous learning experience in many different ways for Brea employees:

- Staff took on a controversial problem out of its comfort zone.
- Employees got out of their department "silos" and interacted with diverse elements of the community and other agencies.
- Staff got to know people very different (yet ultimately very similar) from themselves.
- In terms of special learning activities, city employees organized and facilitated a community task force, conducted research, visited other cities experiencing similar problems, evaluated different problem-solving approaches, and pilot-tested a model program.
- City officials learned that the Brea community would be compassionate and do the right thing…if given the opportunity.
- Working with engaged citizens, the city government promoted positive social change, provided a new model, and in the process helped re-create society.
- Finally, staff learned the important lesson that there is tremendous payoff for taking a good calculated risk.

Learning in this case resulted in a significant experience, which changed people's assumptions and beliefs, which then led to new behavior and new practice.

Organizational   *Individual*
Learning   *Learning*

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At one extreme is planned, programmed organizational learning. Organizational learning is work-related learning and is consciously orchestrated by the organization towards specific organizational ends (e.g., improving customer care, enhancing quality, valuing diversity).

At the other extreme is work or non-work-related employee learning which is self-directed and aimed at enriching the whole person. For example, a lunchtime tai chi class for employees may not be tied to a specific organizational goal but helps participants relax, relieves stress, and opens up their minds. In the process, of course, the tai chi may enhance productivity or problem solving.

The individual learning approach is related to the saying, "Let 1,000 flowers (or in this case, employees) bloom." This approach relies on the inherent belief that if many employees are learning and enriching themselves in different ways, then the organization will eventually benefit over time.

Of course, a middle road is possible. A local government consciously provides opportunities and organizational supports in order to encourage work or non-work-related learning by individuals or teams of individuals. Thus, an organization aims at creating a learning environment.

THEMES FROM THE LITERATURE ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

A review of the literature suggests at least six themes:

Questioning Organizational Assumptions

To promote learning, critical thinking is required. Employees must question the basic mission, assumptions, values, traditions, practices, and taboos (the undiscussables) of the organization. For example, should the mission of a local government focus on serving customers, regulating behavior, or engaging citizens and facilitating change? Learning requires that we constantly question the "why" as well as the "how." In the Brea Job Center example described in the sidebar on page 2, no significant learning would have occurred without first questioning the city's knee-jerk reaction of using police to address the day worker problem. Critical thinking is essential in accelerating the conditions for learning.

Promoting Inquiry

Oftentimes staff meetings are merely advocacy sessions. Our discussions involve everyone advocating positions that undercut true dialogue and potential learning. There is little listening with curiosity. As opposed to advocacy, we need to promote inquiry that leads to a larger intelligence.

Reflecting on Action

Contrary to public perceptions of do-nothing or at least slow-moving government bureaucrats, local government employees are too action oriented, too busy, too overwhelmed. There is no time to reflect on action and therefore little capacity in most public organizations to learn from one's work.

To structure into organizational life some minimal time to reflect, local governments try different approaches. For instance, the executive team of the city of Brea, California, starts off its staff meeting the morning after a council meeting with a session called "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." It is an attempt to reflect on the successes from the night before as well as efforts that need improvement.

> **As opposed to training, learning is a more robust notion that leads to changed beliefs and behaviors and individual growth.**

The city of Fremont, California, uses learning histories to debrief and learn and share lessons from successes as well as failures. After completing a project, team members are interviewed by a noninvolved staff person or university intern. The written "history" chronicles events and analyzes from the viewpoints of project participants what happened right and not-so-right and why. This active method of reflecting is then shared with other organizational members so everyone can benefit from the lessons learned.

While good public organizations exhibit a strong bias for action and a sense of urgency, they will ultimately be effective only if their members reflect upon their action and practice. Adapting to accelerating change through continuous learning requires an interplay between action and reflection.

Learning Together and Sharing Knowledge

The difficult problems of the day (e.g., day workers, homelessness, community violence) cut across department "silos" and require multidisciplinary problem solving and learning. Thus, many local governments tackle tough problems through inter-departmental teams.

To be effective, premier organizations (like General Electric) try to promote "boundaryless-ness." They want employees in one unit to learn from people and experiences outside that unit. Of course, breaking down and crossing boundaries only works in an environment of open-book management. People cannot learn from each other if information and knowledge are hoarded.

Therefore, many local governments, for example, proactively open up their financial books to all line employees, unions, and citizens at large.

After employees learn together through some experience, it is necessary to consciously share knowledge with other organizational members. A good example is the Fremont learning histories that can be shared in writing organization-wide or over the city's intranet. The city of Scottsdale, Arizona, starts executive team meetings with an informal learning report. Team members can share an article, present research findings, discuss some learning from a seminar or conference, or pose a question for dialogue.

Ensuring Safety and Trust

To learn, organization members must take a risk. However, no one will take a risk without a feeling of safety and trust. To promote risk taking and therefore learning, the city of Brea has developed a professional safety net for all employees as a core organizational value. The city manager evaluates and in part determines compensation for all department directors on their risk-taking behavior. Because it is often necessary to "fail one's way to success," the city manager celebrates failures (particularly his own) through a periodic column, "Fabulous Flops," in the employee newsletter.

Promoting Learning as a Basis for a New Social Contract with Employees

In the past, local governments entered into a social contract with employees that involved a guarantee by government of lifetime employment for all employees. In exchange for this guarantee, employees provided to their government employer loyalty and commitment.

In this age of taxpayer revolts and government budgets tied to the economy, the old social contract is untenable. However, the possibility of a new social contract is emerging. The organization provides continuous learning opportunities so employees can enhance their skills, competencies, and contributions while they stay with the organization. If the employee decides to leave, their learning makes them more valuable and

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The Nature of Adult Learning

To be successful in promoting employee learning, local governments must understand the characteristics of adult learners and how they best learn.

According to the Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, it is generally agreed that adult leaders possess the following characteristics:

Diversity. Adult learners are diverse, bringing a wealth of life experiences to the learning situation. Active forms of learning help connect the content to the learners' own meaning structures. Adult learners

- Vary widely in age, ability, job experience, cultural background, and personal goals
- Range in educational backgrounds from no formal schooling through many years of schooling
- Carry well-developed personal identities
- Carry reservoirs of personal experiences, which are learning resources.

Pragmatism. Adult learners want to be able to relate educational content to specific contexts in their lives. These contexts are often in the form of a problem, issue, or concern at their worksite. Consequently, adult learners

- Tend to be pragmatic learners
- Study to improve their performance in other social roles (e.g., parent)
- Let their educational work take a back seat to other responsibilities, such as jobs and families
- Expect their learning time to be well spent
- Hope their educational or training experiences will help them solve real problems in their daily lives.

Self-direction. Adult learners prefer to have some degree of control over their learning. They may evidence a greater or lesser degree of self-directedness depending upon their maturity level and familiarity with the content. They

- Tend to be voluntary learners
- Believe the decision to return to school or take on a major learning activity is an important one
- Believe that education or other learning will be helpful.

Sense of self. The adult sense of self has a significant influence on the meaning of the learning situation for that person. Learners have differing degrees of self-effectiveness and awareness of their own learning styles. They may

- Feel embarrassed about returning to school or other educational settings
- Feel embarrassed to join classes with younger students
- Hold negative impressions of their own abilities
- Hold negative impressions of schools and teachers.

marketable to other employers. It is interesting to note that Brea emphasizes in its job recruitment announcements learning as a specific employee benefit even before advertising the compensation for the position.

Learning is not just another organizational activity. Learning becomes the central element of a new social contract between the organization and the employee.

EFFECTIVE ADULT LEARNING PROGRAMS

In her research of adult development experiences, Dr. Dorothy Billington identified seven characteristics of highly effective adult learning programs:

1. An environment where students feel safe and supported, where individual needs and uniqueness are honored, where abilities and life achievements are acknowledged and respected.

2. An environment that fosters intellectual freedom and encourages experimentation and creativity.

3. An environment where faculty treats or educates adult students as peers—accepted and respected as intelligent, experienced adults whose opinions are listened to, honored, and appreciated. Such faculty members often comment that they learn as much from their students as the students learn from them.

4. Self-directed learning, where students take responsibility for their own learning and work with faculty or trainers to design individual learning programs which address what each person needs and wants to learn in order to function optimally.

5. Appropriate pacing that promotes intellectual challenge and challenges people just beyond their present level of ability. If challenged too much, people give up. If challenged too little, they become bored and learn little. Those adults who reported experiencing high levels of intellectual stimulation—to the point of feeling some discomfort—grew more.

6. Active involvement in learning, as opposed to passively listening to lectures. Where students and instructors interact and dialogue, where students try out new ideas in the workplace, where exercises and experiences are used to bolster facts and theory, adults grow more.

7. Regular feedback mechanisms for students to tell faculty or trainers what works best for them and what they want and need to learn—and educators who hear and make changes based on student input.

These findings support the thinking of Malcolm Knowles, recognized as the father of adult learning. His trailblazing work underlies many of the most effective adult education programs. He reminded us that in optimal adult learning programs, where adults learn best,

both learners and teachers also have fun, for it is exhilarating to really learn.

Based on the above research, local government must therefore ask if they are structuring learning opportunities that…

- Help employees stretch yet do not overly threaten them
- Allow employees to direct or guide their own learning activities
- Integrate their work and life experiences into their learning activity
- Utilize experiential learning activities, including learning by doing
- Encourage critical reflection and active questioning
- Promote a creative experience that is fun.

NINE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

If learning in the workplace is critical in an organization's effort to adapt to accelerating change, what is the role of leaders in promoting continuous learning? Below are nine leadership strategies that can help develop a positive environment for learning.

Build vs. Lead

In their book *Built to Last*, Jerry Porras and Jim Collins studied multinational corporations which over the long haul have dominated their markets. With rare exception, these successful organizations do not have charismatic visionary leaders who by the force of their personality create the high-performance corporation. Rather, great leaders are thoughtful men and women who build the organization over time. In short, great leaders do not lead—they build.

> **Leaders must help establish learning as a core organizational value.**

Peter Senge, who promoted the concept of learning organizations, has suggested in a recent interview that we need to change our image of a great leader. Unfortunately, we typically think of a great leader as a mechanic who gets under the hood of a broken car and fixes up the problem. According to Senge, a more appropriate image of the successful leader is a "gardener" who provides nutrients so that plants can thrive in the garden.

Promote Learning as a Core Value

If managers and other employees are to focus on learning, then leaders must help establish learning as a core organizational value. The leader must be able to articu-

late the tangible benefits of learning to employees as well as the local government and tie key organizational initiatives to workplace learning. In Brea, one of several core organizational values is the Brea Learning Commitment Action Plan (see Appendix B).

Model Attitudes and Behavior Conducive to Learning

Leaders must model learning. The most powerful way that people learn is through modeling. Consequently, leaders need to ask themselves:

- Am I questioning our organizational assumptions and practices?
- Am I taking risks?
- Do I search for new experiences?

Allocate Resources

Certainly, a leader needs to fund learning activities (e.g., benchmarking visits, conference fees, tuition reimbursement). Just as important, however, is allocating nonmonetary resources such as giving employees time away from the office; providing backup office coverage for employees in training; making it safe to critique organizational practices; and encouraging time-outs to reflect.

Provide a Professional Safety Net

A leader must not only model risk taking (an essential element to any organizational learning), but the leader must also protect employees who take calculated risks. To help create a safe environment, the leader must promote a professional safety net as a key organizational value and find opportunities to demonstrate that risk-taking employees are valuable and will be protected (if not celebrated) when they fail.

Challenge People to Stretch

Leaders need to create "stretch goals" for employees and challenge them to take on difficult yet important assignments outside of their normal comfort zones. With the proper support and encouragement, employees then have the opportunity to learn additional skills, acquire and apply new knowledge, and test their capabilities.

Promote a Diversity of Opportunities

Since there is no one best way to learn, leaders need to ensure that people can take advantage of an array of learning activities. General education and training classes, team experiences, citizen participation efforts, debriefings, job rotation, benchmarking visits to other organizations, and pilot projects all are valuable opportunities in order to learn through experience, reflect, and then share and apply the lessons learned.

Reward and Celebrate Learning

In Brea, executive directors are evaluated and in part compensated in respect to their commitment to learning. They are judged on how they model learning, provide learning opportunities and resources for staff, and mentor others. Demonstrated learning achievement is also an essential ingredient in the professional development and performance-based compensation systems of Brea public safety employees.

> **The leader must protect employees who take calculated risks.**

Of course, the best reward is often public acknowledgment. Employees who learn and share and apply their new knowledge can be celebrated in "applause-o-grams," "bravo cards," the city manager's weekly report to the city council, the employee newsletter, the intranet, and impromptu bagel and donut parties with their co-workers.

Support Learning, but Don't Direct

Leaders cannot force learning. For instance, "volunteering" employees to participate in training sessions or other learning activities is ultimately counterproductive. Learning must be self-motivated. Leaders can only help create a positive learning environment.

A MENU OF IDEAS FOR PROMOTING LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

If local government leaders conclude that employee learning is essential in adapting to accelerating change, what then are some ideas that could be implemented in order to foster a learning environment? Below is a menu from which local governments can pick and choose ideas, depending on their organizational culture. In the sidebar on page 8 is a list of certain approaches to avoid.

Implementation Ideas

Create a state of readiness for increased learning in the workplace.
Structure a visioning exercise for governing board members, department heads, and other staff, asking them to envision a world-class organization.

- Ask stakeholders to envision the role of continuous learning in creating a world-class organization.
- Tie learning to the vision and the heartfelt dreams and values of employees.

Invite interested organizational members (including "influentials" and "key communicators") to participate in a study group to dialogue about a commitment to learning.

Involve members of the study group in spreading the word and developing and initiating learning activities.

Conduct a series of conversations with employees on the benefits of enhancing a learning environment.

- Differentiate between training and learning.
- Provide examples of recent learning experiences on the part of individual employees and teams.
- Explore possible budget, management or other organizational supports for learning.
- Discuss the role of learning as part of a new organizational contract with employees.
- Get feedback and ideas to incorporate in the learning initiative.
- Help employees answer the question, "What's in it for me?"

Incorporate learning as a key element in the organization's strategic plan.

Identify a commitment to learning as a key organizational value.

Focus the attention of organization members on learning.

Rationalize the allocation of additional resources to learning activities.

Link learning to other organizational values (e.g., entrepreneurial government, innovation, risk taking).

Tie learning to specific organization or department goals and programs and constantly articulate the connection.

Recruit and hire agile learners.

Promote a commitment to learning in job flyers in order to "screen in" employees who are open to continuous learning and to "screen out" those who are not.

Use scenarios, interview questions, and perhaps even testing to identify agile learners who are self-motivated to learn.

Promote learning opportunities and support for learning as key strategies for attracting and retaining employees, especially star performers and generalists.

Set a minimal number of hours per year per employee for employees to engage in distinct learning activities (e.g., Motorola sets minimal annual expectation of training and education for each employee).

Include learning expectations in all job descriptions.

Identify desired employee competencies and then develop learning experiences to promote these competencies.

Incorporate learning as an organizational expectation in all orientations for new employees.

Discuss learning opportunities.

Emphasize organizational supports and resources.

Survey employees on a regular basis to identify what they want to learn and what support they need to overcome organizational obstacles to learning.

Use employee focus groups for same purpose.

Report back to employees and governing board.

Teach skills that promote learning.

Provide classes or training in areas such as:

- Research skills (e.g., surveys)
- Internet use
- Active listening
- Interviewing skills.

Provide other skills in:

- Group facilitation
- Critical thinking
- Note taking
- Project management
- Interest-based negotiating
- Pilot-testing
- Classroom management/tips for trainers.

> **Investing in the learning of existing employees is cost effective, allowing a lean yet more productive organization.**

Develop learning partnerships with other organizations.

Develop cooperative efforts with other local governments to share teaching resources and keep enrollment up and tuition requirements low.

Offer courses for employees through joint ventures with community colleges and universities.

Offer college credit through the college or university partner.

Encourage credit for some life or work experience.

Promote back-to-school training opportunities by inviting educational partners to participate in an on-site educational fair for employees.

Increase where necessary budgetary support for learning activities.

Recognize that investing in the learning of existing employees is cost effective, allowing a lean yet more productive organization.

Consider appropriate funding for:

- Tuition reimbursement
- Any learning lunches, book clubs, executive learning series

- Learning activities organized through a team of learning coordinators from all departments.

Provide prepaid tuition (instead of tuition reimbursement) for classes, books, and other educational expenses; employees sign "education contract" to ensure that they complete the class or reimburse up-front tuition cost.

Fund some learning projects through entrepreneurial revenue.

Use some end-of-year budget savings to fund learning projects, especially just-for-fun learning.

Balance the focusing of budget resources on high-priority learning activities with allocating resources among a wide array of learning programs.

Offer learning resources and opportunities to all, but focus resources on those ready and eager to learn now.

Model commitment to learning by executives.

Explore executive or management team learning series (e.g., outside lecture series).

Use part of executive team meetings to debrief, share key learnings, reflect, etc.

Use department staff meetings as opportunities for executives to dialogue about learning commitment.

Evaluate (and compensate?) executives in respect to their commitment to learning.

Promote self-learning.

Use trainers as facilitators of self-learning as opposed to instructors.

Use trainers to stimulate, provoke, and facilitate, not train.

Learn/teach/apply.

Recognize that high-impact learning requires sharing and diffusing of the knowledge acquired.

Structure time into daily work as well as team meetings in order to reflect (one cannot learn from experience without reflection).

Develop mechanisms for sharing knowledge and insights and then applying them to our work:

- Use the learning-history approach to extract lessons learned from significant experiences.

- Immediately debrief the employee who has been involved in learning activity (the "half-life" of a seminar is three days).

- Integrate a simple, brief, and easy-to-complete learning report as part of one's learning experience.

- Share learning reports as part of one's learning experience.

- Identify specific slot on meetings agendas for "learning reports."

- Share learning reports where appropriate with larger audiences (e.g., whole organization, governing board, citizen committees).

Provide opportunities for organizational members to teach.

- Inventory in-house talent and create talent bank (include talents developed in "past lives") as a means to identify peer trainers.

- Conduct train-the-trainers sessions.

- Assist in-house trainers in getting certified at community colleges so they are eligible to teach at the college for outside pay.

Enhance team meetings by making them a learning experience.

- Hand out an occasional article and briefly discuss.

- Use self-reflection icebreakers (e.g., self-administered minisurveys, round-robin brainstorming).

- Encourage more inquiry and less advocacy.

- Make questioning an essential part of any meeting.

- Designate a devil's advocate for an important issue.

- Ensure that teams conduct debriefings through impromptu teach-ins where employees teach their co-workers things they have learned themselves.

Encourage cross-training, job rotation, and interdepartmental orientations and multidepartment teams in order to reduce the hoarding of information, turfism, rigid boundaries, and narrow perspectives.

Encourage and provide opportunities for lateral transfers of employees among departments (with guarantee of return to old job).

Integrate fun into learning activities.

Ensure that learning leader has playful attitude.

Get away from the office.

Ensure a comfortable environment.

Emphasize interactive exercises and learning games.

Provide food and drink.

Celebrate learning.

Approaches to Avoid

- Don't equate learning with training
- Don't force learning on people
- Don't look at learning as one or several distinct events
- Don't make learning initiative another fad
- Don't begin using whole new set of jargon
- Don't use the phrase "learning organization"
- Don't get overly hung up on measuring results
- Don't pay for learning achievement—learning should be self-directed, self-motivated, and a joy.

Recognize and celebrate learning achievement.
Provide nonmonetary incentives:

- Recognize learners in city manager's weekly report to city council, employee newsletter, staff meetings, recognition events (e.g., employee banquet, breakfasts).
- Use new recognition awards to acknowledge learning achievements.
- Send out recognition cards (e.g., "You're a star!").

Recognize motivated learners by providing new enriching job assignments with high visibility in the organization.

Market learning opportunities.
Develop a comprehensive communication and marketing plan for the learning initiative, linking learning to organizational values and ensuring that choice and fun are key elements, as well as informing employees of learning opportunities.

Orient and communicate with everyone regarding the new emphasis on learning.

Brand all learning activities and products throughout the organization (e.g., "Scottsdale University," "Tempe Learning Center").

Develop and distribute a catalogue of learning opportunities (fashioned after college course catalogue).

Use intranet to market all opportunities and make available an in-house talent bank.

Conduct a learning fair for all employees .

Use annual on-site employee conference as kick off for learning initiative.

Provide additional staffing assistance in personnel department to support learning initiatives.

Identify learning coordinator in each department.
Develop role of learning coordinator in each department to assess:

- What learning is not taking place?
- What is missing?
- How does department secure needed or desired learning?
- How does department secure needed or desired learning?
- What resources does department need?

Assign learning coordinator to work with department management and all department members to develop two year department learning plan.

Establish a self-managed team of all department learning coordinators in order to inventory in-house talent, share resources, coordinate efforts, facilitate citywide learning budget (departments will continue to have their own training, education, and travel budgets). Provide staff assistance through personnel department.

Recognize and reward learning coordinators.

Develop an employee "university" to promote workplace learning.
Create a "board" of employees to oversee employee "university."

Involve employees in the design and operation of the university.

Use educational partners to enhance employee university offerings.

Use employee university as a transformational resource for organization (e.g., focus on quality, shared leadership, customer service, engaging citizens).

Encourage personal responsibility and self-motivation through individual learning plans (18–24 months?).
Recognize that learning is self-directed; training is other-directed.

Promote strong expectation that everyone has a learning plan (if someone does not want to participate, it is acceptable).

Ask individual employees what they want to learn and then have managers and supervisors weave learning activities into their individual or team jobs.

Develop simple learning plan format that identifies key learning area(s), management support needed, and other resources, if any.

Model this learning expectation—executives, managers, and supervisors take lead.

> **Recognize motivated learners by providing new enriching job assignments with high visibility in the organization.**

Include learning commitment as an element on all performance self-reports, as well as supervisor's performance evaluation of employee (i.e., "What have you learned this year?").

Make a commitment of strong executive and management support for learning initiative.
Provide opportunities and resources to employees for learning.

Answer key question: How can I help employee free up time for this learning activity?

Provide job coverage during learning experience so work does not pile up.

Deal with incoming work during learning experience so work does not pile up.

Ask employees upon return, "What did you learn?" "Let's talk about it."

Provide "stretch" assignments with support ("I'm here if you need assistance"); emphasize the role of leader as a people developer and a gardener.

Include leadership regarding learning activities in department as element of executive and manager performance evaluations.

Design a professional development program that uses in-house mentors or peer coaches.

Explore alternative delivery approaches for learning (e.g., self-paced courses, video classes, Internet-based learning, satellite distance learning).

Explore other ideas.

Expand study missions, benchmarking visits, and field trips of all kinds to stimulate thinking.

Modify training and other learning activities to focus on specific learning solutions resulting from the experience (i.e., how learning experience will enhance one's work or practice) vs. typical training objectives related to skills development.

Consider different kinds of flex scheduling to promote outside learning opportunities.

Expand use of offsite team meetings (e.g., at materials recovery facility, assisted living center) to stimulate thinking on new issues.

Insist on high quality in all learning activities sponsored by the organization (train-the-trainers; better screen all teachers; provide expectations, guidelines, and tips for teachers/trainers).

Start small to build momentum.

Encourage employees to volunteer outside the organization as a way to promote learning.

Use different types of thinkers:

- Intuitive types at beginning of problem-solving process to brainstorm ideas
- Analytic types to evaluate ideas
- Action types to lead group in implementing solutions.

Learning is self-directed; training is other-directed.

Conduct learning forums on specific issues attracting active participants from different disciplines in the organization, as well as participants from the outside.

Develop small learning communities of employees with mutual interests (use intranet to connect people?). This may serve to:

- Break down department barriers
- Connect employees with employees
- Treat implementation of learning initiative as a learning process.

APPENDIX A: BREA, CALIFORNIA'S APPROACH TO RECOGNIZING AND MINIMIZING OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

Obstacles to Learning

Brea employees perceive the following obstacles hinder them and other co-workers from participating in important learning activities:

1. Some of our management and supervisory staff do not actively support the participation of employees in training and other learning activities.
2. Because of the heavy and demanding workload of many employees, they feel constrained to leave their desk or their crew or other workstation to participate in an outside learning activity. Employees feel that they will only be more overwhelmed when they return to their office or workplace.
3. Shift work and part-time employment make it difficult for some employees to take advantage of learning activities.
4. Due to the lean staffing in many departments, some employees are reluctant to participate in learning because there is no coverage when they are gone.
5. Some employees do not have time to partake in learning because of family, schooling, and/or other personal responsibilities.
6. Some employees may not be able to pay for tuition up front and then wait for tuition reimbursement.
7. Learning is often perceived as mere training; therefore, employees do not see the opportunity to learn in other than training settings.
8. The distinct boundaries and general "turfism" among departments hinder the sharing of knowledge and the applying of what has been learned.
9. Some employees do not perceive tangible benefits in committing their personal time and energy to continuous learning. Employees may not be clear regarding the key question of "what's in it for me?"

A Menu of Tangible Measures to Minimize Obstacles to Learning

A number of measures can help minimize the obstacles to learning identified by Brea employees. Depending on the unique nature of one's work situation, employees and their supervisors and managers can pick and choose which measures will be effective in helping employees participate in learning. These measures include the following:

1. Just as we stress customer care as an overriding organization priority, the city manager and executive team will emphasize the Brea Learning Commitment as a core organizational and as a key benefit for all employees. As a core value, learning will not be seen as an additional or add-on activity; rather, learning itself is priority work.
2. In addition to promoting the Brea Learning Commitment in employee newsletters and at citywide and department/division employee meetings, the personnel department will continue to conduct an annual on-site employees conference which will help highlight this critical organizational value.

3. The personnel department will emphasize learning opportunities as a tangible employee benefit in all job recruitment flyers.
4. Both the personnel department and the operating department will stress learning opportunities and our expectations regarding the Brea Learning Commitment as part of the new employee orientation.
5. To further promote our organizational expectations regarding broad-based learning, the personnel department will develop a sample criterion on learning for all performance self-reports and performance evaluations (with sample questions).
6. The personnel department will develop a larger group of on-call employees for departments to help minimize the coverage problem. Departments are also able to use overtime to help minimize the coverage problem.
7. The personnel department will ensure that our on-call personnel are adequately trained so that they can better cover positions of those employees participating in learning activities.
8. The executive team will commit to offering more flex scheduling opportunities so that employees can participate in specific learning activities. Flex scheduling and periodic telecommuting may also allow an employee to go home or off-site after a learning or training session so one can focus and catch up on accumulated work without normal interruptions.
9. The personnel department as well as other departments will endeavor to schedule most training and other learning activities on-site and for no longer than four hours, with a session in the morning and a repeat session in the afternoon.
10. The personnel department will work with other departments (especially police, fire, and maintenance) to identify ways of repeating sessions or video or audio taping them so more employees can take advantage of the learning experience. A formal learning report by those who do participate may also help share the knowledge with those who could not participate.
11. Department directors and other management staff will explore how to integrate learning (and especially reflection) in our day-to-day work. For example, departments can schedule an informal or formal learning report as part of every staff meeting. Employees can use the learning report to share an article, key learnings from a conference, or some other experience. Department director and managers will also consciously schedule debriefings as part of staff meetings so we can learn from our successes and failures. The executive team will commit to share these "lessons learned" on a more organization-wide level.
12. The executive team will explore and implement ideas on how to promote cross-department orientations and information sharing. This effort to orient ourselves in what other departments are doing and opportunities to collaborate and learn together will help reduce rigid boundaries.
13. The personnel department will explore developing a prepaid tuition program.

APPENDIX B: THE BREA LEARNING COMMITMENT ACTION PLAN

The city of Brea is experiencing accelerating change as part of a larger global environment. A way for the city to maintain and improve upon its competitive position and thus preserve the quality of community life is to promote continuous learning among all its organizational members.

Brainpower and the ability to learn and apply new knowledge are key assets in a world of high-velocity change. Continuous learning will enable the city of Brea to change without crisis.

In addition to helping adapt to accelerating change, an effective organization-wide commitment to promote learning provides a number of specific benefits:

- Attracting and retaining the best employees
- Improving organizational productivity through motivated and energized employees
- Promoting esprit de corps, organizational pride, and image
- Increasing employee commitment to the Brea organization
- Providing continuing growth opportunities for longer-tenured employees
- Better using existing talents and brainpower to benefit the community
- Promoting succession planning and leadership development
- Enhancing entrepreneurial efforts.

It is assumed that any individual learning or growth, regardless of whether it is specifically targeted toward an organizational goal, in fact enhances organizational life and productivity.

It is also assumed that the best learning is employee driven and self motivated.

Goals

The two overriding goals for the learning initiative include:

- Promote organizational renewal, vitality, and creativity
- Encourage individual employee self-growth.

Definition

In the literature, learning is defined as a change in behavior based on experience. Experience changes one's beliefs or assumptions. The changed belief leads one to respond with changed behavior.

Experience drives learning (thus the expression, "experience is the best teacher"). Changed behavior is the sign of learning.

Learning Activities

- Reflecting and learning from experience.
- Citizen participation activities
- Field trips
- Visits to public and private organizations
- Debriefings (including lessons learned)

- Cross-training
- Job rotation
- Formal training seminars
- Specialized educational programs (e.g., TED classes)
- General education classes (e.g., through a college or university)
- Research
- Pilot testing proposals and other new ideas
- Teaching classes or facilitating groups.

Key Questions

Any implementation ideas should help the city of Brea address several critical questions:

1. How do we define learning in this organization?
2. How do we introduce and invite all organizational members to participate in the learning initiative?
3. How does the city in practical ways promote growth of its existing intellectual capital?
4. How does the city better integrate learning into its daily work, so that learning is not a separate event that competes for employees' time?
5. If the best learning is self-motivated, how does the organization create a true support structure for ongoing learning for its employees?
6. How do we identify and then better utilize existing but underutilized talents, skills, and experiences of our employees?
7. How do we go beyond traditional skills training to promote more robust learning?

Two-Prong Approach

The executive team has agreed to implement a two-prong approach in promoting learning:

1. An executive, manager, or line employee can suggest and implement a learning activity for self and others
2. The city commits to providing certain organizational supports to encourage and enhance individual and group learning.

Organizational Supports for Learning

The city management commits to do the following in the next six months:

- Executive team commits to begin pilot testing a learning initiative for a 24-month period.
- City manager and executive team will discuss the learning initiative with the city council.
- Recognizing that each department is unique, every executive director will discuss with the city manager the approach for dialoguing with department members about the learning initiative. The city manager commits to provide whatever assistance is requested.
- After all the departments have initially discussed the learning initiative, we will bring together interested employees from throughout the organization to further the dialogue and address key questions.
- As part of the department dialogues, departments will identify key obstacles (e.g., time, money, coverage) and

subsequently the executive team will meet to implement steps to overcome those obstacles. (See Menu of Tangible Measures to Minimize Obstacles to Learning in Appendix A.)
- In response to obstacles, the executive team will consider a menu of responses including:
  - Flex scheduling and release time
  - Use of entrepreneurial revenues and unused funds at the end of year for learning activities
  - Pool of on-call people to cover employees who are involved in learning activities
  - Available facilities and technology
  - Mentoring
  - Other
- The executive team will provide the necessary resources to implement the city's intranet. The intranet may include an employee talent bank, an inventory of ongoing or one-time learning employees, a learning-oriented bulletin board, class sign-ups, and other learning activities.

City management commits to do the following within the first 24 months:

- Different departments will examine how to promote interdepartment awareness and cross-training (e.g., senior housing subsidy and senior center staff; utility billing staff and meter readers; development services and redevelopment services staff; police and community services staff). Efforts could include ride-alongs, department visits, mini–open houses, formal orientations, and visitors to department staff meetings.
- Members of executive team will better recognize and celebrate learning achievement on an ongoing basis through the use of weekly memo, bravo cards, intranet, etc.
- The city manager will continue to include learning commitment as a distinct element on executive performance evaluations.
- As part of executive team learning reports, the team will expand use of debriefings.
- Executive team will conduct a 6-, 12-, and 24-month review of initial pilot activities. At the end of 24 months, the executive team will identify what has worked and what has not, and then celebrate organization successes and failures.

The following proposals will be considered at a later date once the organization is more fully involved in our learning initiative:

- The personnel department and other departments could use the employee talent bank in order to utilize our own employees to lead training classes and create a fuller learning experience.
- The executive team could add an employee or contract employee or other resources to the personnel department in order to coordinate and promote learning activities.
- As part of one's performance evaluation, every employee could consider learning activities and goals for the upcoming review period.