



NIC White Paper



The Corrections Learning Organization



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Executive Summary

Today, the need to understand effective leadership is greater than ever before: we are living in a smaller, more global environment that is changing at a rapid, often overwhelming, and seemingly unmanageable pace. Accepting the status quo is not an option. High-performance teams require leaders who not only understand and can readily adapt to this changing world, but who foster and inspire continuous learning and improvement among each and every member of the team. Put simply, leading an effective organization means leading a *learning organization*.

Introduction

The subject of leadership has been a topic of passionate study for centuries, evolving from fables and stories of a given leader's personality traits, ambitions, and achievements (or perhaps their shortcomings), to modern academic degree programs that explore leadership issues across a wide variety of organizational and life contexts. Today, the need to understand effective leadership is greater than ever before: we are living in a smaller, more global environment that is changing at a rapid, often overwhelming, and seemingly unmanageable pace. Accepting the status quo is not an option. High-performance teams require leaders who not only understand and can readily adapt to this changing world, but who foster and inspire continuous learning and improvement among each and every member of the team. Put simply, leading an effective organization means leading a *learning organization*.

This isn't news. Twenty-five years ago, Peter Senge coined the term "learning organization" in his landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), and it has since become a cornerstone concept for leaders in corporate America. Senge outlined an approach of five disciplines necessary for an organization to identify and develop the learning capacity of each of its members, and in so doing, to enhance the learning capacity of the organization itself. The organization that can practice these disciplines as part of its routine—the ways in which its people interact with one another, the ways in which they approach problem solving, and the ways in which they build on their shared talents and abilities—becomes an organization that is efficient and effective in the fulfillment of its mission. Developing an organization toward this end is the essential goal of leadership.

Since Senge's work concentrated almost exclusively on the corporate sector rather than on the public sector or government institutions, most people involved in corrections are unfamiliar with his work. Yet the framework of Senge's theory has tremendous potential for improving any corrections organization's operations and helping those who work within the organization to reach their goals. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of Senge's theory of learning organizations, describe its application in a correctional organization, and discuss how staff at all levels can stimulate and contribute to the continuous learning and forward progress of the organization.

What Is a Learning Organization?

Senge defined a learning organization as one “that is continually expanding its capacity to create its own future” (1990: 14). According to Senge, every member of an organization has the innate ability and desire to learn and grow, and an organization must discover how to tap into and utilize this capacity if it hopes to keep up and stay competitive in a rapidly changing world (1990: 4). Senge identified the fundamental characteristics of an effective learning organization as “one that creates continuous learning opportunities; promotes inquiry and dialogue; encourages collaboration and team learning; establishes systems to capture and share learning; empowers people toward a collective vision; and connects the organization to the environment” (Murrell, Schneider, & Gould 2009: 15). Further, Senge points to four key elements as being essential for an organization to successfully and consistently act as a catalyst for change:

1. The organization must be guided by a sense of direction and purpose that is endorsed by leadership.
2. The organization’s leadership must lend its power and authority to fostering and promoting change.
3. Staff must recognize the need for their participation, and they must desire to be part of such change.
4. Leadership starts at the top, but must eventually permeate throughout all levels of the organization.

Organizations that are able to apply these concepts will find themselves successfully rooted in “collective leadership and collective learning” (Murrell, Schneider, & Gould 2009: 15).

Recognizing that applying these concepts is not a simple or easy task, Senge identified and described five disciplines that an organization must practice if it wishes to successfully transform into a learning organization:

1. **Personal mastery** is “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (Senge 1990: 7). It is the motivation and commitment to seek out knowledge and acquire new skills because we are aware of our inexperience, ignorance, or shortcomings. It means having an honest self-awareness about our individual strengths and weaknesses.
2. **Mental models** are “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (Senge 1990: 8). Each of us sees the world in a unique way; our perception of the world is the sum of our experiences, values, and culture (and includes biases and prejudices of which we may not even be aware.) Mental models shape how we understand ourselves, other people, and the situations we face.
3. **Shared vision** involves “shared ‘pictures of the future’ that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance” (Senge 1990: 9). While each organization is made up of individuals with unique backgrounds and

personal goals, they all need to share the same mission, goals, and basic values in order for the organization to succeed.

4. **Team learning** “starts with ‘dialogue,’ the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine ‘thinking together’” (Senge 1990: 10). Team learning is essentially the combined practice by a group of the first three disciplines: personal mastery, attention to mental models, and building a shared vision. Teams are dynamic systems; they work best when there is strong communication and understanding among their members.
5. **Systems thinking** is the fifth discipline. “It is the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice.... By enhancing each of the other disciplines, it continually reminds us that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts” (Senge 1990: 12). Unlike a car, an organization cannot be broken down into its individual components to be fixed. Instead, it is necessary to understand how *all* of the organization’s parts are interrelated and interdependent; it must be considered as a whole.

According to Senge, an organization must foster and support the practice of each of these disciplines at the individual level in order to successfully promote growth and change at the organizational level. David Garvin further built upon this belief in his book *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work* (2000), where he stipulated that in order to master these five disciplines, an organization must practice five fundamental functions:

1. Information gathering and problem solving;
2. Experimentation;

3. Learning from the past;
4. Learning from promising practices; and
5. Transferring knowledge. (Hall 2012:17)

What Does a Learning Organization Look Like?

So do learning organizations really exist? Or is all of this talk about “fundamental characteristics,” “key elements,” and “necessary disciplines” just more noise from the halls of academia that has no practical application in the real world? Unfortunately, many correctional leaders are tired and skeptical of the academic community proclaiming “what works” in their business, and are apt to simply tune out and stick ardently to their own personal beliefs. But learning organizations *do* exist and succeed, and there is perhaps no better example than the U.S. Navy’s Blue Angels.

The Blue Angels are the U.S. Navy’s premiere flight demonstration team, and they perform spectacular aerobatic shows for millions of spectators every year. Blue Angel pilots execute thrilling precision maneuvers that seem to defy the laws of physics, flying their 22,000-pound aircraft a mere 18 inches apart at speeds exceeding 500 miles per hour. The audience may see only a team of six pilots, but it takes a much larger organization of nearly 130 officers and enlisted personnel to make each show safe and successful. Each member of the Blue Angels must not only be expert at their job, but they must be able to learn and adapt quickly, as each demonstration presents new challenges. Because safety is paramount, they must work within a plan that is incredibly detailed and precise, which must be executed exactly the same way every single time they practice and every single time they perform. In order to organize their

complex, unforgiving maneuvers in the air, they establish a “center point”—a clear, well-defined single landmark on the ground that the entire team can identify and understand. Every member of the team follows checklists religiously, but they communicate any problems or deviations without hesitation to ensure that all systems are functioning exactly as expected and that all aspects of the performance meet the highest possible standard.

The Blue Angels are the epitome of a high-performance team, yet they didn't achieve this level of mastery without hard work, and they don't maintain it without constant practice and development—both as individuals *and* as an organization, they must work continuously to develop and improve their level of skill and proficiency. The backbone of this process of continuous improvement is the Blue Angel's Debrief. After every practice and every show, the Blue Angels gather to debrief, sometimes spending three times the amount of time it took them to fly critiquing everything from the way they marched to the planes to the most subtle nuances of each aerial maneuver. And when they debrief, it is not just the pilots or department heads sharing their input, but also a wide variety of other members of the team, ranging from junior enlisted mechanics to the flight surgeon to civilian ex-Blues who observed the show with the crowd.

These debriefings are nothing short of exhaustive, but every detail is reviewed and every voice is heard in a candid discussion that focuses on successes and failures alike. The Blue Angels make themselves wide open to this type of constructive criticism and feedback because they know that it is the only way to improve. Perhaps the

greatest lesson the Blue Angels have for anyone involved in a quasi-military organization such as corrections is that before the pilots, ground crew, and ranking officers enter the debriefing room, each one symbolically removes his or her rank insignia.

The business of the Blue Angels might seem to be far removed from the business of corrections, but a great deal can be learned from how they continually strive for, and seemingly achieve, perfection.

How It Applies to Corrections

Senge's work showed that implementing meaningful change and maintaining a culture of excellence within any organization is a complex, demanding, and never-ending process, and it is perhaps an understatement to say that the process of change within corrections organizations is extremely difficult. While the reasons for this difficulty are multifaceted, perhaps the most significant include dealing with the organization's informal work norms and the challenge to empower line staff to actively participate in a genuine atmosphere of change. Yet the importance of building a correctional learning organization could not be greater. To borrow from Murrell, Schneider, and Gould (2009), the sheer numbers and diversity of people exposed to the corrections system is staggering: every year, millions of people have contact with the corrections system in some way, including offenders, their families, attorneys, judges, employees, and the media. "Everyone who comes into contact with [the corrections system] is influenced by its philosophies, principles, and day-to-day actions. ***The possibilities for teaching***

and learning are enormous” (Murrell, Schneider, & Gould 2009: 15). (*Emphasis added.*)

How can today’s correctional leaders initiate true organizational change and ensure that staff is “on board” with the process? This is a daunting task, but it can be accomplished in an organization where leaders actively and consistently model their belief in the need for (and process of) change—showing staff on the front line that they really do “walk the talk” and supporting an open process of genuine feedback and support. Correctional leaders must understand the importance of this type of modeling and accept this burden in full prior to implementing any system-wide initiatives or strategies that require consistent, common thinking or practice, or else the effort is wasted.

Although the role of formal training is essential to establishing the culture of a learning organization, it is possible (indeed, necessary) for individual leaders—at all levels—to draw upon and practice the fundamentals put forth by Peter Senge to help move the corrections organization forward toward becoming a learning organization. Just like the Blue Angels, corrections organizations *can* be learning organizations in spite of their necessary reliance on policy, procedure, and hierarchal structure.

The application of Senge’s principals in a corrections organization is far more straightforward than many imagine:

1. Personal mastery. Increasing personal mastery—one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities—is key: the Blue Angels would not be the premiere team that

they are without each and every member continually striving to master his or her job, and being confident of their value and place on the team. The continual learning and growth of each member of the correctional organization is similarly crucial. The culture of the correctional organization should provide a safe environment where trust and respect for each team member's role is readily acquired and apparent to all. This is especially important in developing the qualities of initiative, pride, and leadership throughout the organization.

Just as the Blue Angels debrief every action of every flight, correctional leaders who encourage and model attention to the question "What did I learn today that will make me better tomorrow?" create an organizational culture that supports regular opportunities for dialogue and discussion, promoting self-awareness and self-exploration. Leadership can be taught and leaders can learn new ways of relating to their subordinates, which in turn encourages them to become leaders in their own right (Murrell, Schneider, & Gould 2009:16).

2. Attention to mental models. Senge described how the assumptions, biases, and filters through which we all view life define how we make sense of the world and how we respond to it. In a learning organization, individuals are encouraged to challenge these beliefs, both in themselves and in others. It is crucial for these assumptions and understandings to be made known, examined, and challenged if organizational improvement is

to take place. Once again drawing from the example provided by the Blue Angels, leaders within a correctional organization can encourage such examination by seeking out and openly supporting diverse perspectives and opinions, valuing them as an asset rather than an annoyance.

The key element that must be considered in this discussion is the need to abandon the traditional hierarchical organizational model when challenging organizational assumptions and perceptions. To be clear, this is not to say that it is possible or even necessary to completely neglect the need for a quasi-military organizational hierarchy in our correctional institutions; rather, it means that leadership of different types must be heard, engaged, supported, and valued. As aptly demonstrated by the Blue Angels, this *is* possible and can lead to spectacular results.

3. Building a shared vision. Leadership within a learning organization requires the ability to design a system in which people recognize and share one unified vision. Shared vision within an organization creates a sense of purpose, bringing people together and driving them to excel and continually strive for improvement because they want to be part of realizing that vision. The Blue Angels aren't just a flight demonstration team—they are “the best of the best” with a commitment to excellence, and every member of the team is not only motivated to be part of that vision, they are encouraged, supported, and enabled in doing so. Similarly, corrections organizations must develop and design a strong sense of shared purpose and vision that overlaps various roles and duties.

The corrections organization with a strong sense of shared vision will find that players from across all levels of the organization function more in unison and with far greater efficiency. It is axiomatic that greater efficiency leads to a greater sense of personal satisfaction, which in turn enhances each employee's motivation and sense of commitment to the organization.

4. Team learning. More than just team building, team learning is inspired when roles and responsibilities for all organization members are clearly defined and when information about the successes as well as the failures of the group are shared. Every member of the correctional organization is a stakeholder. The corrections organization that develops a sense of team learning in this manner has the potential to shift the focus of the organizational culture away from personalities and politics, enabling it to better deal with the demanding complexity and deep-seated structural issues and forces within the correctional system (Murrell, Schneider, & Gould 2009:17).
5. Systems thinking. Senge's fifth discipline is the hub of the wheel, the foundation that links the other four disciplines. "It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots'" (Senge 1990: 68). This is a broad perspective that involves seeing the function of the correctional organization as a whole rather than a collection of different departments—everything is interrelated, including problems *and* opportunities. As

demonstrated by the Blue Angels, a learning organization that develops and supports a truly representative multidisciplinary team ensures that stakeholders from each part of the system and their unique perspectives are heard. Applying this thinking in a corrections organization gives that organization the ability to acknowledge and understand that aspects of the organization itself can be the source of its problems, offering the opportunity to move as a team toward eliminating the underlying causes rather than repeatedly trying to address the symptoms.

The Importance of Line Leaders and Managers

Senge identified three types of leaders within learning organizations who are critical to long-term organizational success: local line leaders, executive leaders, and internal networkers (1990: 5). In a correctional organization, “local line leaders” would be first- or second-line supervisory staff such as sergeants, lieutenants, or unit team managers—individuals who possess significant organizational responsibility and “bottom-line” focus. Successful local line leaders are the people who get things done; they have the ability to move the organization through transformational change with their openness to new and innovative principles and practices, and their ability to lead subordinates and subcultures within the organization toward the same shared vision. Senge’s research highlights the importance of these local line leaders and managers, and indeed, the success of any corrections learning organization depends upon them.

The Function of Executive Leaders

As illustrated by the Blue Angels, within a learning organization, executive leaders are viewed in a very different sense than in traditional hierarchical leadership models. In

fact, in a true learning organization, a large part of the executive leader's role relates to his or her ability to simply support, mentor, and guide local line leaders. This perspective is contrary to traditional models of management—and especially to the quasi-military model found in corrections—in which all responsibility for decision-making lies with top executives. The most important function of an executive leader in a learning environment is to offer guiding ideas, whereas the organization relies most heavily on the abilities of the local line leaders to initiate new ideas and practices and to achieve the overall mission. This practice allows leadership to permeate throughout the organization, while striving to meet goals in the context of a shared vision.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for many executive leaders to surrender their sense of power and control and allow subordinates to develop and enhance their positions as organizational leaders. It is a challenging concept to master, as executive leaders must remain the ultimate authority and must be responsible for making the tough decisions. It is likely, however, that the executive who is able to successfully model this type of sophisticated leadership will have the best and most consistent input from subordinate staff, allowing even the most difficult situations to be handled effectively and swiftly.

The Influence of Internal Networkers

Internal networkers are probably the least understood and least appreciated of the three leadership types within a learning organization; however, their contributions are invaluable. Individuals who lead through internal networking possess little, if any, organizational authority, but they are nevertheless influential leaders, inspiring others through their own strength of character and the power of their convictions (Senge,

1996; Rosenbach & Taylor, 1998). Within a correctional organization, internal networkers operate at the lowest level of the hierarchy, yet their influence on the organization is significant. Because the internal networkers' only source of "authority" is the result of their own personal convictions and beliefs, individuals who follow do so based on a strong sense of identification with that person or his or her ideals. This is key, because members of the organization who *choose* to participate in learning initiatives will be far more committed to the effort than those who have been compelled to do so by a recognized organizational authority figure. Regarding the authority and influence of the internal networker, Senge said, "This, we find time and time again, is the only legitimate authority when deep changes are required, regardless of one's position" (Senge, 1996; Rosenbach & Taylor, 1998).

The Future of Corrections: Leadership Is Learning

Leading a successful correctional organization is a complex task that requires the skill and effort of far more than just one person, no matter how powerful or influential.

Outdated philosophies and systems must be challenged and changed, and today's most effective correctional leaders recognize that meaningful change can only occur as a slow process in which the empowerment of others is essential. While hierarchy is inevitable within correctional organizations, it is the responsibility of executive leadership to relinquish authority and allow others to lead from their various strategic positions within the organization. Correctional leaders must take the position that learning and growth is vital to the success of their organization. In the absence of this position, "the learning disciplines remain mere collections of tools and technique—

means of solving problems rather than creating something genuinely new” (Senge, 1996; Rosenbach & Taylor, 1998).

Despite the challenges and failures that will most certainly occur as the result of the day-to-day realities of corrections, today’s leaders must continue to recognize the need for change, ready themselves for the challenge, and prepare for the risks that must be taken. Only then can they affect real, proactive change within their respective organizations; only then will the profession of corrections as a whole resemble other great institutions that continually learn, mature, and improve.

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