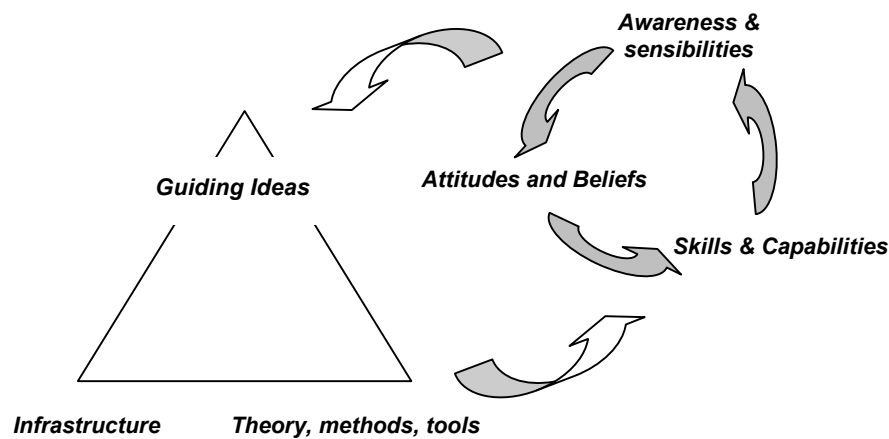# *Learning in a project based organisation: an oxymoron?*

Projects bring about change, and one of the objectives of project management is to learn the lessons that emerge from the experience gained in making each change. Any project life cycle has within it a phase generally referred to as 'close-out' during which the team is expected to identify lessons learned for dissemination to future projects and the wider organisation. The APM life cycle expects it (Post Project Evaluation) and BS6079 specifies it (Post Project Review). So, there is the intent to 'learn'. Achieving 'learning' is, however, quite another matter.

Peter Senge is widely acknowledged for his influence on the principles and practice of organisational learning. In his book 'The Fifth Discipline' (1990), he introduced the concept of 'systems thinking' as the fifth discipline to support his other four disciplines, namely:

 Personal Mastery – the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening personal vision and of seeing reality objectively;
 Mental Models – deeply engrained assumptions, pictures or images about how we understand the world and how we act;
 Building Shared Vision – the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future to create the goals then owned throughout and organisation;
 Team Learning – the ability of a team to function at a level greater than the sum of its parts – starting with genuine 'thinking together'.

In his successor publication (1994) an image is presented that brings together what Senge refers to as the 'domain of enduring change' (or deep learning cycle) and the 'domain of action' (organisational architecture) in a way which I think helps bring to life the concept of organisational learning in the context of project management.

The resulting 'circle & triangle' model of a Learning Organisation (see below) produces a really helpful way of thinking about the contrast between the 'tangible' aspects of learning in the workplace e.g. tools and methods, and the less tangible aspects e.g. attitudes and beliefs.

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Awareness & sensibilities

Guiding Ideas   Attitudes and Beliefs

Skills & Capabilities

Infrastructure   Theory, methods, tools

What this model suggests is that the usual focus for a lot of organisational activity around 'learning' is the 'tangible triangle' – dabbling with tools and infrastructure, databases and IT. In fact, the most significant contributors to learning are those found in the circle – essentially, making people aware of the need to learn and changing people's attitudes and behaviours to learning.

It's often the case, I think, that we assume it's the tangible things which are the ones that really matter, and conversely, those which are less tangible, are less important. In fact, all the evidence suggests that the opposite is true. In other words, a focus on the triangle where changes can easily be made actually means that those changes are potentially (and often) short lived. It's changes driven by the circle of the 'deep learning cycle' that endure - these changes, whilst difficult to make, are generally the ones that last and make a real difference.

Think of your own situation and the kinds of initiatives taken to improve learning in the workplace. Certainly in my experience, they generally involve a fair amount of process, lots of documentation, a good dose of tools supported by the all-important IT system. Very rarely do we take seriously the notion of values and behaviours, of attitude to learning and motives to learn when it comes to learning from experience and I do wonder if the lessons identified in project closure reports ever result in changed attitudes or behaviours.

I think that what's needed is a more strategic approach to organisational learning. And this does not simply happen by a process of osmosis. It's not surprising to find that NASA have recently appointed a 'Chief Knowledge Officer' (Ed Hoffman – those of you at the APM Conference will remember his infamous YouTube video: decrease suck, increase awesome) tasked with the job of making learning a reality in that organisation. So, leadership from the top is needed. But in my opinion, that's not enough. We've got to change attitudes towards learning and be prepared to share knowledge and understanding without feeling that we're giving away our intellectual capital – or if we are (which is probably the case) we are motivated for all the right reasons to do so.

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