

The Corporate Learning Cycle



The learning cycle schematises the processes that are part of learning within and between organisations. It draws attention to processes that connect individual and local learning with collective and overall learning. It places emphasis on the fact that the learning cycle should be closed in order to create benefits both on an organisational as well as an individual level.

For the purpose of explanation we start at the process in which knowledge is mobilised for usage in new activities.

Mobilising

Mobilising knowledge before and during activities

Knowledge will only add value when applied. Gathering, validating and structuring knowledge will have no value when the results of these activities are not used in a day-to-day practical context. A closed learning cycle requires all available internal and external knowledge to be mobilised at the start of a new project or any activity that requires knowledge. Much of the effort of organisations and networks is focused on enhancing the availability and accessibility of knowledge for practitioners. Internet and intranets provide the infrastructure to make people and information accessible across the globe and can search through a vast amount of sources of knowledge. However, our experience shows that this is not enough. Motivational and cultural factors determine whether practitioners are willing to search for knowledge that they could apply in their own context.

Asking questions might demonstrate that someone is incapable to solve the problem, copying a solution might bring less credit; the source of the knowledge is unknown and therefore not trusted and solving the problem yourself might be more fun. The effect is that though the knowledge is accessible in itself it might be that practitioners are not motivated to search for it or apply it. The learning cycle is therefore not closed.

Practice

Learning and applying knowledge in practice

All people learn while acting. They reflect on the effects of their actions and might change their mental models and ways of working based upon the outcome of these reflections. This reflection might not always occur consciously and systematically. An organisational learning cycle however will benefit from practitioners who reflect consciously and systematically on their actions and the effects of their actions. They pose questions such as: Did our actions deliver what we expected? What are differences between actual and expected results and how can we explain them? What can we learn from it? What would I do differently the next time? These reflections will bring lessons learned which might improve future actions.

Capturing

Capturing and validating knowledge

Individual practitioners who reflect on their actions and effects of their actions will deliver valuable input for the process of capturing and validation of knowledge in an organisational context. To leverage individual learning an organisation or network should organise processes to integrate new knowledge in its existing 'body' of knowledge. Furthermore it should ensure that knowledge will not disappear when people leave and bring continuity in its collective memory.

The process of integration contains activities for capturing potentially interesting learning, validation of the quality, enrichment of existing insights with new insights and also replacement of old practices with new practices (unlearning). The way this process is organised can vary strongly across organisations and networks. In some sectors this process is organised very systematically (i.e. US Army, Nato) and in other sectors this process is very informal and interactive (professional firms).

Structuring knowledge

It might be that the 'product' of the capturing and validation process is not suited for use by practitioners. It requires rework, annotation, and explanation to make it suitable for the target group. Furthermore it should be made accessible within the existing 'body of knowledge'. This requires setting 'pointers' to the new knowledge and communicating to the target group where to find it. Professional magazines for instance fulfil an important role in this process. They communicate about new insights and they refer their readers to underlying dossiers, people or organisations. The added value of the Internet is evident in this context.

This organisational learning cycle as a thinking tool is applicable on all levels of organisations and networks. Knowledge management aims to create favourable conditions for an effective and, thus closed, learning cycle. Effort might focus on the required infrastructure, implementation of the processes and relevant instruments but also on motivational and leadership issues.

Information

We would be happy to discuss with you how we might help you to improve your Corporate Learning Cycle. For further details please contact Senior Consultant [Mike Kelleher](#) by e-mail or telephone +31-30 230 89 00.

