



Shifting the Mental Model in a Learning Organization: From Training Assessment to Learning Journey¹

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“Learning organizations” [are a place] 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. - Systems scientist, Peter Senge

A learning organization nurtures the continuous learning of its individual team members as well as the learning of the company as a systemic whole. Workplace training programs are one such opportunity for an individual to master new skills and capabilities that support not only the goals of the company, but also their own personal vision.² Self-

Below are some considerations when customizing training programs in the workplace to ensure better alignment with the mental model conducive to a continuous learning organization.

Primary Goal: To Foster the Mental Model of a Self-Directed and Collective Learning Journey

Re-frame the mental model of learning using metaphor

- Address outdated metaphors of learning, such as the “boot camp” where recruits may “bomb” the test and only a few succeed, or “the greasy pole of success” which employees struggle to climb without regard to personal strengths, interests or values
- Establish a new metaphor for how the company envisions the process of continuous and self-directed learning, for example:
 - Tapestry (interdependent, weaving together knowledge, skills, wisdom of experience)
 - Garden (growth, seeds, watering, flourishing, harvests)
 - Journey (progressive, paths, roadmaps, destinations)
 - Building (generative, foundations, plans, framing)

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² For more information on personal mastery, learning organizations, and systems thinking, see:

- Bloom, B. S. (1968). Learning for Mastery. Instruction and Curriculum. Regional Education Laboratory for the Carolinas and Virginia, Topical Papers and Reprints, Number 1. *Evaluation comment*, 1(2), n2.
- Senge, P. M. (2014). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. Crown Business.
- Wheatley, M. (2011). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. ReadHowYouWant. com.

Strive for a transparency of process

- Training programs not only build new skills and capabilities, they also provide an opportunity to reiterate the organization’s philosophy of learning and the multi-purpose nature of training.³ Explicitly communicate the beliefs about learners and learning, such as:
 - Individuals have an innate desire to learn, be creative, and take responsibility
 - Learning is an upward spiral process (vs. a loop), each turn building the individual’s (and, thus, the organization’s) capabilities
 - Training programs are designed for both personal mastery and, consequently, team mastery
 - “Failing forward” is fundamental to continuous learning

Shift the power dynamic through an Interactivity of process

- Old mental models of learning place the authority for learning in the hands of others; new models engage the individual’s own innate desire to learn
- Provide opportunities or check points for training participants to rate the process
 - Check the process mid-stream
 - This attests to the organization’s desire to learning alongside the employee and helps to establish a relationship of “power with” versus “power over”
 - Ask participants their perspective on the process
 - Does the experience of training process match the stated intention?
 - Does the participant feel more empowered in their learning?

Attend to the language of personal mastery in training program communications and skill acquisition rankings

- Numerical (e.g., 0-5), alphabetical (e.g., A-F), or other leveled rankings (e.g., stars) may trigger past associations where others were in primary control of the individual’s learning process
- Use language that reflects the progressive, growth-oriented nature of learning

For example, some combination of the following words might be used to describe how a participant is currently demonstrating a level of understanding or capability on their journey towards personal mastery. In other words, where they currently stand on the spiral learning path.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline • Beginning • Early • Emerging • Initial • Introductory • Nascent • Preliminary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building • Developing • Evolving • Forging • Growing • Progressing • Rising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adept • Capable • Foundational • Practical • Secure • Solid • Working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced • Comprehensive • Deep • Essential • Strong • Substantial • Thorough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exemplary • Expansive • Holistic • Integrated • Leading edge
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³ For more information on spiral learning, human motivation, and the concept of failing forward, see:

- Bruner, J. S. (2009). *The process of education*. Harvard University Press.
- MacGregor, D. (1960). *The human side of enterprise* (Vol. 21, No. 166-171). McGraw-Hill: New York.
- Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *Failing forward*. Harper Collins.