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The Learning Cultures of Organisations

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy
In Human Resource Management**

**At Massey University
Palmerston North, New Zealand**

Philip L. Ramsey

2003



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This is to certify that the research carried out for my Doctoral thesis entitled "The Learning Cultures of Organisations" in the Department of Human Resource Management, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand is my own work and that the thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xii
Abstract	xv
CHAPTER 1: <i>The Journey Begins</i>	1
1.1 Idiosyncrasies of the Research	5
1.2 Reading Causal Loop Diagrams	8
1.3 Structure of the Thesis.....	10
CHAPTER 2: <i>Culture</i>	15
2.1 Vernacular Culture	15
2.2 Culture in Anthropology	17
2.3 'Culture' in Organisations	19
2.4 The Meaning of Organisational Culture.....	20
2.5 Classifying Cultures	22
2.6 Changing Culture.....	25
2.7 Anthropology vs. Management	26
2.8 Summary	28
CHAPTER 3: <i>Dilemma Theory</i>	29
3.1 Dilemmas in Culture	29
3.2 Dilemma Dynamics	30
3.3 Schismogenesis.....	31
3.4 Reconciliation	33
3.5 Reconciliation Through Polarity Management.....	34
3.6 Diagramming Interdependent Opposites	36
3.7 Leverage	39
3.8 Consequences of the Perspective	40
3.9 Summary	42
CHAPTER 4: <i>Cultures and Subcultures</i>	43
4.1 Macro-Cultural Differences	43
4.1.1 <i>Making Rules and Discovering Exceptions</i>	43
4.1.2 <i>Analysing or Integrating</i>	44
4.1.3 <i>Communities made up of Individuals</i>	44
4.1.4 <i>Status Awarded to Achievers or Ascribed</i>	44
4.1.5 <i>Inner- or Outer-Directed</i>	44
4.1.6 <i>The Way Time is Viewed</i>	44
4.1.7 <i>Balancing Equality and Hierarchy</i>	45
4.2 Macro-Cultures in English-Speaking Democracies	45

4.3	Masculine and Feminine Values.....	46
4.4	Functional Cultures	47
4.5	Occupational Cultures.....	49
4.6	Enter the Learning Organisation	52
4.7	Summary	55
CHAPTER 5: Perspectives on the Learning Organisation		57
5.1	What is Learning?	58
5.2	Disputes Over Terminology.....	60
5.3	Continuous Individual Learning.....	65
5.4	Learning to Work as One.....	68
5.5	The New Workplace	73
5.6	Conscious About Learning.....	78
5.7	Experimentation and Change	85
5.8	Capacity Building	88
5.9	Summary	92
CHAPTER 6: Reconciling Perspectives in a Model		95
6.1	Individual vs. Social Learning	97
6.2	Systems vs. Culture	98
6.3	Change vs. Maturity	100
6.4	Limitations on Perspectives.....	102
6.5	Reconciling Perspectives.....	105
6.6	Conclusion	111
CHAPTER 7: Sustainable Learning.....		113
7.1	The Inner/Outer Paradox.....	113
7.2	Why the Inner Orientation?.....	117
7.3	Commercial Inconsistencies	119
7.4	The Ecological Learning Organisation.....	123
7.5	Essential Capacities.....	125
7.5.1	Trust and the Work Ethic	126
7.5.2	Flow and Autotelic Personality	127
7.6	Defining Learning Organisations	128
7.7	Summary	131
7.8	A Turning Point	131
CHAPTER 8: Research Philosophy		133
8.1	Overview of the Study	133
8.2	Research Dilemmas.....	135
8.3	The Researcher	138
8.4	The Subject	140
8.5	Methodology	144
8.6	Making Choices.....	145
8.7	Criteria for Measurement Systems.....	146
8.8	Summary	148

CHAPTER 9: Consultants and the Learning Organisation	151
9.1 Consultants and the Learning Organisation.....	151
9.2 The Study	152
9.3 Method.....	152
9.4 Sample.....	154
9.5 Results.....	155
9.5.1 <i>Criteria</i>	155
9.5.1.1 <i>Fundamental Change</i>	155
9.5.1.2 <i>Senior Management Commitment</i>	156
9.5.1.3 <i>Empowerment</i>	156
9.5.1.4 <i>Staff Engagement</i>	157
9.5.1.5 <i>An Intentional Sustained Process</i>	157
9.5.1.6 <i>Resource Availability</i>	158
9.5.1.7 <i>Knowledge Management</i>	158
9.5.1.8 <i>Recognition of Learning</i>	158
9.5.1.9 <i>Systems View of Learning</i>	158
9.5.1.10 <i>Self Reliance</i>	159
9.5.2 <i>Qualms</i>	160
9.5.3 <i>The BARS Instrument</i>	162
9.5.3.1 <i>BARS Development</i>	162
9.5.3.2 <i>Consultants Reaction to the BARS Instrument</i>	165
9.5.4 <i>Dilemmas from Consultants</i>	166
9.6 Assessing the BARS Instrument	170
9.7 Nominated Organisations.....	172
9.8 Summary	173
CHAPTER 10: Practitioners and Learning Organisations.....	175
10.1 Sample.....	175
10.2 Method.....	176
10.2.1 <i>Background to Workshop Design Decisions</i>	176
10.2.2 <i>Workshop Procedure</i>	179
10.3 Results.....	180
10.3.1 <i>Skill New Zealand</i>	180
10.3.2 <i>South Waikato District Council</i>	184
10.3.3 <i>Pan Pac Forest Industries</i>	188
10.4 Comparing Dilemmas	191
10.5 Critique of the Workshop Process	193
10.6 Summary	195
CHAPTER 11: Designing the Instrument	197
11.1 Presentation of Dilemmas.....	197
11.2 Constructing Dilemmas	200
11.3 Initial Testing of the Instrument	206
11.4 Summary	208

CHAPTER 12: <i>Piloting the Instrument</i>	211
12.1 The Sample.....	211
12.2 Method of Analysis.....	213
12.3 Technical versus Social Skills	217
12.4 Balance versus Commitment.....	219
12.5 Systems versus Environment.....	221
12.6 Emotionally Neutral versus Emotionally Engaged	222
12.7 Executive Led versus Community Driven.....	224
12.8 Reflection versus Action	226
12.9 Inclusion versus Voluntary	228
12.10 Flexibility versus Consistency.....	229
12.11 Performance versus Learning	231
12.12 Customers versus Aspirations	232
12.13 Getting Work Out versus Orienting New People	234
12.14 Instrumental versus Integrative.....	236
12.15 Localness versus Aspirations	237
12.16 Self Reliance versus Knowledge Sharing	239
12.17 Innovation versus Mastery	239
12.18 Conclusions.....	242
12.19 Summary	243
CHAPTER 13: <i>Reviewing Dilemmas</i>	245
13.1 Match with Subcultures	245
13.1.1 <i>Gender</i>	246
13.1.2 <i>Age</i>	246
13.1.3 <i>Ethnicity</i>	247
13.1.4 <i>Function</i>	247
13.1.5 <i>Service</i>	248
13.1.6 <i>Role</i>	249
13.1.7 <i>Conclusion</i>	250
13.2 Troublesome Dilemmas	250
13.3 Dilemmas Reviewed.....	254
13.3.1 <i>Dilemma 1 Technical—Social</i>	254
13.3.2 <i>Dilemma 2 Balance—Commitment</i>	254
13.3.3 <i>Dilemma 3 Systems—Environment</i>	255
13.3.4 <i>Dilemma 4 Emotionally Neutral—Emotionally Engaged</i>	255
13.3.5 <i>Dilemma 5 Executive Led—Community Driven</i>	255
13.3.6 <i>Dilemma 6 Reflection—Action</i>	255
13.3.7 <i>Dilemma 7 Inclusion—Voluntary</i>	255
13.1.8 <i>Dilemma 8 Flexibility—Consistence</i>	256
13.1.9 <i>Dilemma 9 Performance—Learning</i>	256
13.1.10 <i>Dilemma 10 Customers—Aspirations</i>	257
13.1.11 <i>Dilemma 11 Get Work Out—Orient New People</i>	257
13.1.12 <i>Dilemma 12 Instrumental—Integrative</i>	258
13.1.13 <i>Dilemma 13 Localness—Aspirations</i>	258
13.1.14 <i>Dilemma 14 Self Reliance—Knowledge Sharing</i>	259

13.1.15	<i>Dilemma 15 Innovation—Mastery</i>	260
13.1.16	<i>Conclusions</i>	260
13.4	Learning Cultures of Organisations.....	260
13.4.1	<i>Skill New Zealand</i>	261
13.4.2	<i>South Waikato District Council</i>	262
13.4.3	<i>Pan Pac Forest Industries</i>	263
13.4.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	264
13.5	Conclusions	265
CHAPTER 14: <i>Rest from the Journey</i>		269
14.1	A Holistic Model of Learning Organisations.....	269
14.2	A Measurement System for Learning Organisations	275
14.3	Assessing the Measurement System	277
14.3.1	<i>Capacity to Synthesise</i>	277
14.3.2	<i>Emphasises the learning of Organisations</i>	277
14.3.3	<i>Provides a basis for Empirical Research</i>	277
14.3.4	<i>Charts Mental Models</i>	278
14.3.5	<i>Contributes to Change</i>	279
14.3.6	<i>Reflects Real or Natural Learning</i>	280
14.4	Final Conclusion.....	281
CHAPTER 15: <i>Epilogue</i>		283
15.1	Publication of Results	283
15.2	Extending the Research.....	285
15.3	A Final Dilemma	287
REFERENCES	289

APPENDIX 1 Publications Resulting from the Research.....	305
1a Countering Cultural Polarities.....	305
1b The Structure of Paradox	313
1c Feminine and Masculine Values in Flight Instructing	325
1d Learning to be Complete.....	335
1e The Learning Organisation Metaphor	345
1f Natural Learning.....	355
1g The Culture of Training	361
1h Rethinking Grades for Sustainable Learning.....	371
1i How Consultants Operate	379
1j Stories and Learning.....	389
1k Reframing the Perfectionist's "Catch-22" Dilemma	397
 APPENDIX 2 The Delphi Process	 415
2a Initial Message of Invitation.....	416
2b Nominations and Reasons Provided by Experts.....	418
2c Criteria Derived from Expert Responses to Round 1	421
2d Second Message: Extending the Criteria	423
2e Responses to Round 2	424
2f Criteria Derived from Expert Responses to Rounds 1 and 2.....	426
2g Third Message: an Invitation to Qualm.....	427
2h Responses to Round 3	429
2i Summary of Qualms.....	434
2j Fourth Round: Using the BARS Instrument	435
2k Comments on the BARS Instrument	437
 APPENDIX 3 The BARS Instrument.....	 441
 APPENDIX 4 The Instrument	 445
 APPENDIX 5 Summaries of Respondents Comments.....	 457
5a Dilemma 1 Technical—Social.....	458
5b Dilemma 2 Balance—Commitment	459
5c Dilemma 3 Systems—Environment	460
5d Dilemma 4 Emotionally Neutral—Emotionally Engaged	461
5e Dilemma 5 Executive Led—Community Driven	462
5f Dilemma 6 Reflection—Action	463
5g Dilemma 7 Inclusion—Voluntary.....	464
5h Dilemma 8 Flexibility—Consistence	465
5i Dilemma 9 Performance—Learning.....	466
5j Dilemma 10 Customers—Aspirations	467
5k Dilemma 11 Get Work Out—Orient New People.....	468
5l Dilemma 12 Instrumental—Integrative.....	469
5m Dilemma 13 Localness—Aspirations	470
5n Dilemma 14 Self Reliance—Knowledge Sharing.....	471
5o Dilemma 15 Innovation—Mastery	472

APPENDIX 6 Interview Transcripts	473
APPENDIX 7 Method of Triads Validation	503
APPENDIX 8 Dilemma Instrument in 5-Option Format	507

List of Tables

1.1	Research Questions.....	5
5.1	Dictionary Definitions of Learning	59
5.2	Perspectives on Learning Organisations	64
6.1	Perspectives and Values.....	97
8.1	Types of Research Activity	142
8.2	Measurement System Criteria.....	148
9.1	Learning Organisation Criteria.....	159
9.2	Qualms Expressed by the Expert Group	161
9.3	Consultant Dilemmas by Means of Identification	166
10.1	Workshop Procedure.....	179
10.2	Skill New Zealand Time Line.....	180
10.3	Skill New Zealand Stories.....	181
10.4	Dilemmas from Skill New Zealand	182
10.5	SWDC Time Line.....	184
10.6	SWDC Stories.....	185
10.7	Dilemmas from South Waikato District Council.....	186
10.8	Pan Pac Time Line.....	188
10.9	Pan Pac Stories.....	189
10.10	Dilemmas from Pan Pac.....	190
11.1	Dilemmas Included in the Instrument.....	200
12.1	Survey Respondents by Organisation.....	212
12.2	Functions Represented in the Sample	213
12.3	Fixed Categories in the Logistical Regression	215
12.4	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 1	218
12.5	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 2	220
12.6	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 3	222
12.7	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 4	224
12.8	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 5	225
12.9	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 6	227
12.10	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 7	229
12.11	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 8	230
12.12	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 9	232
12.13	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 10	233
12.14	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 11	235
12.15	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 12	237
12.16	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 13	238
12.17	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 14	239
12.18	Logistical Regression for Dilemma 15	241
12.19	Comparison of Dilemma Results.....	242
13.1	Gender and Learning Values	246
13.2	Age and Learning Values	246
13.3	Ethnicity and Learning Values.....	247
13.4	Function and Learning Values.....	248

13.5	Service and Learning Values	249
13.6	Role and Learning Values.....	249
13.7	Demographic Variables and Construct Validity	250
13.8	Construct Validity Conclusions	266
14.1	Underlying Principles of a Model of Learning Organisations	274
14.2	Features of a Measurement System for OL/LO	276
14.3	Assessing the Measurement System	281

List of Figures

1.1	Causal Change.....	8
1.2	A Balancing Process.....	9
1.3	A Reinforcing Process	10
1.4	A Fix that Fails.....	10
1.5	Structure of Research Activities.....	11
1.6	Expanded Plan of Thesis Structure	12
2.1	Schein’s Levels of Culture.....	22
2.2	Handy and Harrison’s Quadrant Model.....	24
2.3	Deal and Kennedy’s Quadrant Model.....	24
3.1	Polarity Map for Individualism and Communitarianism.....	34
3.2	Areas Seen By Idealogues.....	35
3.3	The Polarity Two-Step.....	36
3.4	The Circularity of Values	37
3.5	Over-reliance on One Value	38
3.6	Interdependent Opposites in Conflict.....	39
5.1	Demand, Capacity and Flow.....	90
6.1	Individual Learning—Social Learning Polarity Map	98
6.2	Systems Based—Culture Based Polarity Map	99
6.3	Acting—Reflecting Polarity Map.....	100
6.4	Leader Driven—Community Based Polarity Map.....	101
6.5	Experimentation and Change—Capacity Building Polarity Map	102
6.6	Vicious Cycle of Individual Learning	103
6.7	Vicious Cycle of Change Based Learning.....	104
6.8	Virtuous Cycle of Learning	107
6.9	Stages of Definition Development.....	108
7.1	Cyclical Natural Systems	120
7.2	Economic Shifting the Burden	122
7.3	Stress and Mobility	124
7.4	Inner Focus—Outer Focus Polarity Map.....	129
7.5	Performing—Learning Polarity Map	130
8.1	Research Overview	134
9.1	The BARS Instrument.....	163
9.2	Emotionally Neutral—Emotionally Engaged Polarity Map.....	167
10.1	Aspiration—Pragmatism Polarity Map.....	193
11.1	Approaches to Dilemma Resolution	198
12.1	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 1	217
12.2	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 1	218
12.3	Confidence Intervals for Ethnic Groups—Dilemma 1.....	219
12.4	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 2	220
12.5	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 3	221
12.6	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 3.....	222
12.7	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 4	223
12.8	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 5	225
12.9	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 5.....	226

12.10	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 6	227
12.11	Confidence Intervals for Gender—Dilemma 6	228
12.12	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 7	228
12.13	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 8	230
12.14	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 8.....	231
12.15	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 9	231
12.16	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 10	233
12.17	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 10.....	234
12.18	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 11	235
12.19	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 12	236
12.20	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 13	237
12.21	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 14	239
12.22	Confidence Intervals for Organisations—Dilemma 15	240
12.23	Confidence Intervals for Functions—Dilemma 15.....	241
13.1	Dilemma Diversity Quadrant.....	251
14.1	The Learning Journey CLD.....	271
15.1	Practitioner Relevance—Academic Independence Polarity Map.....	288
A7.1	Method of Triads Map of Dilemmas	509
A8.1	Approaches to Dilemma Resolution	512
A8.2	Figure-Ground Diagrams for the Technical—Social Dilemma	512

Abstract

While there is significant interest in the area of learning organisations, research in this field has been fragmented. There is a need for an holistic model of learning organisations and a measurement system that can be used by both researchers and practitioners. This thesis applies Dilemma Theory as a means of meeting this need.

An holistic model was developed based on a definition of learning organisations as ones that consciously seek to balance capacities with demands. In seeking this balance, an organisation will undertake a learning journey in which it encounters a variety of learning dilemmas: points where it must choose between alternative approaches to learning, each of which is attractive. In making these choices, learning-related values are established in the organisation. These values are the basis for a “learning culture” which shapes the way learning is understood and approached by the organisational community.

Presenting people within an organisation with learning-related dilemmas allows learning cultures to be charted, thus providing the basis for a measurement system. Fifteen learning-related dilemmas were identified using three processes. Firstly, literature on learning organisations was reviewed to identify conflicts between metaphors used to explain the learning organisation. Secondly, a group of New Zealand consultants took part in a Delphi Technique process, in which they established criteria for identifying learning organisations and surfaced dilemmas embedded in the criteria. Finally, ‘Culture Exploration Workshops’ were conducted in three organisations to surface dilemmas experienced by business practitioners engaged in learning journeys.

The 15 dilemmas identified were used to chart differences between 5 organisations. The measurement system was successful in identifying differences between organisations. Results were also consistent with values that might be expected from sub-cultures represented in the sample.

The study concluded by outlining a programme of research aimed at refining the measurement system and applying it to the study of learning organisations.