Assessing the learning organization: part 2 – exploring practical assessment approaches

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Abstract

Asserts and explores the claim that further headway in substantive wide-scale learning organization development is seriously jeopardised unless individual organizations objectively measure their progress. In part 1 a new evaluative standpoint grounded in "New Science" is suggested, and foundations for two non-traditional discriminant approaches based on this standpoint are discussed. The potential to link such assessments to business performance is evaluated. In part 2, applications of these two approaches in organizational settings are reviewed.

Introduction

In part 1 of this article (Smith and Tosey, 1999) we argued that without the capability and disposition for organizations to measure their progress toward learning organization ideals, further headway in substantive wide-scale learning organization development will be seriously jeopardised.

To attempt to redress this situation, we proposed a new perspective for evaluating progress toward learning organization ideals, including foundations for two non-traditional discriminant approaches which would not require the intrusion of experts either in the application of the assessments or in the analyses and interpretation of results.

In part 2, applications of these two approaches in organizational settings are reviewed. Related instruments are described which have been used in pilot studies to assess and monitor parameters the authors consider relevant to the learning organization, and some results of their application are discussed. The potential to link such assessments to business performance is further highlighted.

Two approaches to assessment based on a "New Science" organizational behavioural platform

In part 1 we discussed how a learning organization might structure behavioural change based on the "new science" concept of "fields". We have used this understanding as the foundation for development of assessment methods which are practical and consistent with the tenets of field theory. These methods comprise:

- An approach based on a three "field" system (Focus, Will, Capability) for modelling performance, where performance is driven by the general business outcomes or learning organization ideals desired (Smith, 1993, 1997).
- An approach based on a model of organizations as "energies" of consciousness (Tosey, 1994).

In part 2 of this paper we explore the details of these approaches and how we have applied them in attempting to measure and monitor the current "state" of a learning organization.

We begin our discussion with approach A because it has been the most strongly grounded in organizational performance measurement through application in many actual cases, and where the measurement methodology has been well established.

Approach A: Focus, Will, Capability, Performance System (F/W/C-P System)

This outcomes-driven performance system model is presented in Figure 1. The model has been introduced successfully since the mid-1980s by one of us (Smith) into organizations as diverse as Exxon (Smith, 1993), Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (Smith and Saint-Onge, 1996), and IKEA (Drew and Smith, 1995). The model has been used in a number of instances as the practical means to facilitate the development of a learning organization (Smith and Saint-Onge, 1996). A very detailed account of its use in learning applications and in establishing linkages to business outcomes has also been published (Smith, 1997).

According to this model, performance is envisaged as dependent on three elements, or "fields" as described in part 1; namely Focus, Will and Capability. These three fields form a dynamic system. Ideal performance is defined as those behaviours which it is anticipated will actually affect the various business outcomes and learning organization ideals which the organization plans to achieve. The actual current performance level achieved by the system depends on the interactions and interdependencies of the three fields.

Focus represents a clear definition and understanding of the performance proposed; Focus is associated with questions such as What ...?; How ...?; Who ...?; Where ...?; When ...?; Why ...? The field of Will represents strength of intent to action the performance defined in Focus; Will is associated with attitudes, emotions, beliefs and mindsets. Capability represents the wherewithal to transform into reality the performance defined in Focus; Capability is associated with such diverse areas as skills, infrastructure, budgets, tools, physical assets etc. A change in any one of these fields may effect a change in the state of one or both of the other fields.

This performance system is consistent with the notions discussed in part 1 of dynamic connectedness, fields of meaning for action, and organizing gestalt. Once ideal Focus, Will, and Capability are defined, the system forms a "strange attractor", and individuals in the organization will make meaning to produce order from chaos through these fields.

In learning organization development the performance model provides a visionary core at the organization's "centre" to invoke such fields (McNeil, 1987; Parker, 1990). Space is never empty; an organization seeks to fill business space with coherent messages. Otherwise, dissonant messages will creep in as employees bump into conflicting fields, and it

Figure 1 The performance system
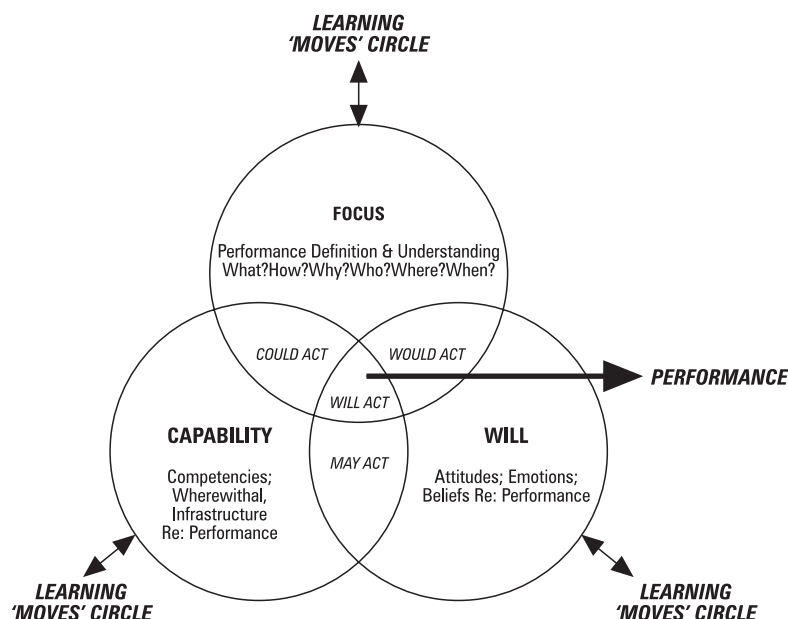
all becomes a jumble. The model's fields represent the business ideas which provide the "conceptual controls" essential to creating the kind of vision espoused for the learning organization (Howard, 1990) and for setting strategy (Sanders, 1998). They act as fields to give form to work, and structure what's happening at the level of the individual. The model is particularly important because it provides three "levers" which can be set, in principle, to position an organization to become a learning organization. Furthermore, as will be shown in a later section, the current positioning of the "levers" can be checked via instruments such as questionnaires and compared to the designed settings.

The most favourable set of conditions for optimal performance occurs when Focus, Will and Capability form a self-reinforcing system, with all fields in balance and harmony. As Figure 1 shows, current performance potential is represented by the degree of overlap of the circles; optimal performance being represented by complete congruence of all three circles. Imbalance and lack of congruence typically lead to misdirected and wasted efforts as well as loss of performance. For example, organizations often concentrate on the skills required to carry out a particular activity without regard for employees' understanding of what they are to do, or of their motivation to do it.

Areas shown in Figure 1, where only two model fields overlap, are typical of real-life situations. For example, it is not unusual for an individual to founder because (s)he has a relatively clear understanding of the problem(s) (s)he is charged to action (strong Focus), adequate interpersonal skills and resources to carry out the actions (moderate Capability), but no belief in the method or incentive to follow the method through (low Will). The key to performance optimization is the continual dynamic tuning of the degree of overlap of the fields based on remaking and reshaping meaning through learning initiatives.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the performance model is consistent across all levels of the organization; however, the meaning of Focus, Will and Capability will change to reflect the changing context.

Measurement of the status of a learning organization is therefore related to measuring the current state of the performance system model versus design ideals. As is shown in

Figure 3, the model fields can be envisaged as moving on three vectors. This provides the mechanism by which quantification of change and the current state of the fields can be accomplished. In addition, since the performance articulated in the model is grounded in actual business outcomes, linking to the bottom line becomes feasible, subject to our comments in part 1.

Behavioural change measurement using the F/W/C-P model

This approach has been used successfully in such diverse organizations as Imperial Oil, Exxon, CIBC, Kraft and IKEA. It should be noted that in all instances of its application the model has been used as both a measurement and monitoring device and as a remedial tool to focus the learning needs. In this article we discuss only its assessment applications.

The assessment technique is based on a relatively brief instrument which interrogates stakeholders regarding comments related to their perceptions of the state of the three performance-related fields. A Likert scale is used, and employees polled simply tick off their appreciation of the relevant status of the organization in relation to the comment. Although the comments are specifically related to one or other of the three fields, the comments are randomized in the instrument and additional comments are added to help validate for honesty etc. Questionnaires are usually answered anonymously, although sectioning by team, division etc. have been used on occasion. A sample from an un-randomized team-related instrument is presented in Table I.

Analysis of the results typically involves calculation of mean, median, mode, maximum, minimum and outliers on scores on each statement, and for a field as a whole, followed by the transfer of these statistics onto the three vectors. Overall balance for the fields and their individual strengths and "hot spot" are readily identified, and can be addressed. By applying the instrument at regular intervals progress monitoring can be undertaken.

We are still trying to validate a "bottom line" correlation; however there are potential links in place, since performance is always defined based on the (measurable) business outcomes to be attained. In Wheatley's (1992) terms, it seems that here we are measuring people's perceived sense of the
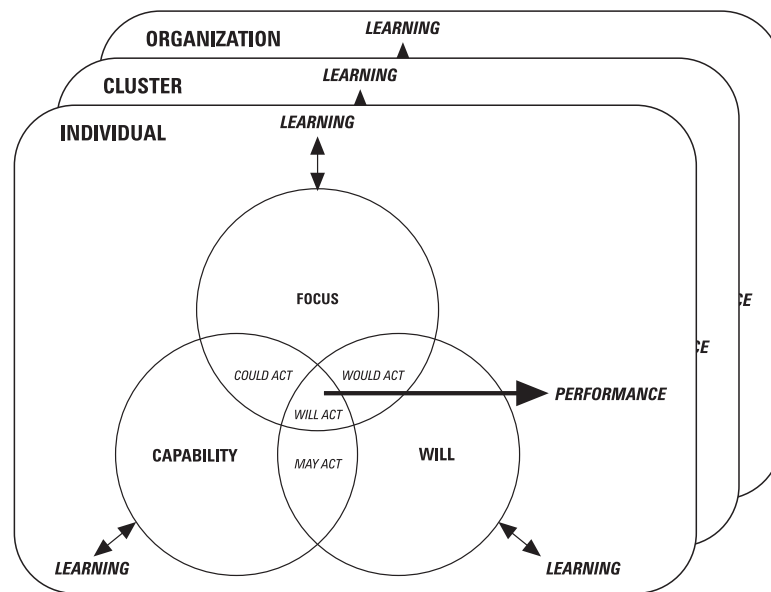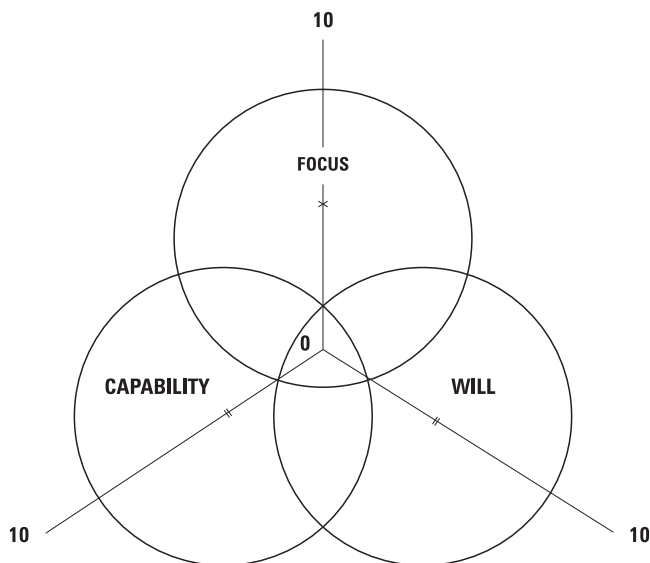
Figure 2 All levels based on the same model

Figure 3 The three measurement vectors

Table I Sample statements from an "approach A" team-evaluation instrument (participants respond on a Likert scale – strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Focus-related:
- I have a good idea of how our company is meeting its competitve challenges
- Our team's goals for the future have been made clear to me
- We all know the best way to go about getting our team's work done
- I am fully aware of how my contribution will be valued
- Our team has full access to the information we need to get our job done well

Will-related
- The work our team does is very meaningful to me
- I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization
- We put in extra effort when we get behind schedule
- The company and I believe in substantially the same values
- I feel the organization can be trusted to have my best interests at heart

Capability-related:
- This team has the skills to do the job
- Resources are made available when required for unexpected priority work
- Management is organized for effectiveness
- I am trained to fulfil my role
- Our teamwork is excellent

"coherence" of the strange attractor in the organization. If so, the question is of what business measures we would expect this to correlate to. For example, it might optimize profitability at some points in time, but not necessarily most of the time. It might impact more on the organization's capacity to decline and be renewed, rather than cling on to old structures and ways of doing things.

A drawback with the performance model approach has been its inability to show the degree of assessment detail that is often of interest either from the point of view of discriminating progress or better informing remedial learning. This has entailed

formation of post-instrument collaborative exploratory groups from within the communities under study to jointly explore and articulate personal details – a time and resource consuming effort, often demanding consultant intervention.

This gave rise to the idea that the instrumented-measurement approach used with this model might be used only to set and

adjust the three "levers" (Focus, Will, Capability) that influence learning organization development. In-organization outcomes resulting from the settings of the levers would be assessed via a different and more detailed model, to provide superior straightforward assessment. Such a detailed model is approach B, which is based on organizations as systems of "energies" (Tosey 1994). Exploration of this approach is described in the next section.

Approach B: organizations as energies

The concept of the "learning organization" has implied a need for new ways of thinking about organizations. Various approaches to understanding organizations already refer to a concept of energy. For example, DeBoard (1978) writes of mental energy based on Freud's theory of personality; here energy is a relatively mechanistic "force" which "drives" the organization.

Other, more recent ideas about organizations as energy parallel the "New Science" (Wheatley, 1992) rather than the "old" and explore the fluidity and patterning underlying the material world. Pedler *et al.* (1991) describe their model of the learning company as essentially about energy flow. Morgan (1986) and Lessem (1991) refer to the theory of physicist David Bohm, which views "process, flux, and change as fundamental, arguing that the state of the universe at any point in time reflects a more basic reality" (Morgan, 1986). Reference is made to energy in the field of organizational transformation (e.g. Adams, 1984), with Ackerman's "flow state management" (1984) being based on the idea that organizations can be seen as flows of energy. Notions of energy also figure prominently in ancient wisdom (for example, the chakra system – see Vaughan, 1985). These emphasize the qualitative aspects and significance of energy. Energy is seen as human consciousness rather than a purely physical phenomenon.

In this paper we concentrate on energy as a property of the "field" (Parlett, 1991; Wheatley, 1992); as something created by, and representing the qualities of, the relationships between people and the context in which they meet; as products of the state of the three fields described in the previous section. As Wheatley says, these are qualities

that " ... we can observe in our experience, yet find elusive to pin down in specifics" (1992). She refers to power, for example, as " ... a real energy that can only come into existence through relationships" (1992).

Drawing on such sources, we have developed a heuristic and speculative framework of seven types of energy that can be related to organizational life (for example see Tosey (1994) for a more detailed theoretical introduction; also Boydell (1990) and Lessem (1991) for related approaches). The central themes and main associations of each energy are summarized in Table II.

Because each dimension of energy refers to an aspect of people's experience of organizational life, as perceived by them, the patterning of energy can in principle be mapped to form a representation of patterns in the organizational energy-state. By way of illustration, we would expect those dominated by crisis and survival to be experienced as highly active in the initial levels of energy (i.e. existence). Those in which communication and community are valued and promoted would be more active in the "heart" and "truth" areas. "Decaying" organizations, such as the over-bureaucratized, uncommercial public sector type of corporation may have become more dormant in lower energies and have lost touch also with a sense of higher purpose, and so could be dependent mainly on routines and procedures, manifesting one form of the energy of "order".

In relation to the earlier references to "strange attractors" (Wheatley, 1992), it is through this framework that we view control and management in organizations as an issue of relationship. In other words it is about the qualities of the web of relationships that are created and sustained through interpersonal interaction, systems and so on.

Table II Approach B – energy designations and associated themes

Existence	Survival, safety, transitions
Action	Activity, competition, "chemistry"
Order	Form, design, structures, plans, goals
Heart	The intrepersonal, social, political
Truth	Meanings, beliefs, communication, expression
Insight	Holism, irony, wisdom, new paradigm thinking
Spirit	The transpersonal, the sacred

All the energies are present in potential in any organization; all are dynamic, like plates to keep spinning. Managers have choices about which energy or energies to emphasize in their leadership. Just as there can be imbalance in the F/W/C-P model, so there can be imbalance of energies. For example, management through "existence" energy may well utilize fear for survival. Through the energy of "order", structures, procedures and rules might be the main tools.

At the same time this model allows for infinite varieties of expression of the various energies, so recognizing the uniqueness of individual organizations and sub-systems. In other words the "heart" energy of one organization could be manifested through a commitment to the social welfare of its employees; in another through a climate of honesty and authenticity; and in yet another through a preference for "politicking" as a basis for interaction.

Behavioural change assessment based on organizations as energies (consultative method)

Originally this framework was used as a method of mapping the qualities of relationship. It was speculated that congruence or alignment of energies would equate broadly to an effective "strange attractor" in that it would reflect a state in which the conditions have been set for optimal learning and performance. Tosey (1994) has used this framework mainly as a reflective, educational tool in one-to-one consultation, assessment and coaching. A key assumption is that people are already able to sense "energies" because, as Wheatley suggests, people can report on and distinguish between the felt sense of different atmospheres.

The approach works in an associative and intuitive way, building up a collaborative "reading" (Morgan,1986) through layers of dialogue. This reading enables reflection on, for example, energies that appear to be dominant or missing; and on "blocks" to the flow of energy through the organizational system.

As an example, Tosey researched collaboratively the experience of a new departmental manager in an international aid organization with reference to the kinds of experiences that that manager ought to be aware of when working in a learning organization context. This exploration was

conceived as developing a representation of the engagement or overlap of personal and organizational energies, in the sense of a pattern of resonance. Thus the representation was a field made visible through the manager's reported experiences in the organizational context as that particular person interacted with "the organization" (i.e. the other people and their activities mediated through organizational systems and events).

Some of the principal observations made in collaboration with this client were that:
- Fear and interpersonal animosities seemed to have become channelled into creating structures and physical distance. In other words this institutionalization "defused" the fear and anxiety by creating routines and structures (the energy of "order"). There was little attempt to address these difficulties through direct interpersonal means ("heart").
- The client felt strongly that the organization was not operating as community ("heart"), even though it consisted of only some 100 people.
- Members of the department found it difficult to express publicly how they felt ("truth").
- The global vision of the organization ("spirit") was not translated into shared vision or strategy ("insight"). The manager perceived fragmentation into individual projects and withholding of any coherent overview.

Such observations led to formulating a number of working hypotheses for the manager and organization to explore. The process was not intended to yield direct solutions because the framework is not diagnostic in the sense of identifying "cures". The emphasis was to be curious about the apparent blocks to energy, especially here in the energies of "heart" and "truth", and so to assess field status.

To date the framework appears successful as a facilitative method of assessment, but with the limitation that it is mainly those already conversant and comfortable with its language who are able to use it to advantage. For others, the "learning curve" in beginning to think this way appears very steep. We therefore sought to develop a more user-friendly tool which would retain its value through equipping people with a language and framework that would enable them to

access more easily this "felt sense" of organizational fields. Our initial exploration in instrumented approach B is described in the next section.

Behavioural change assessment based on organizations as energies (instrumented method)

In this most recent phase of our work we are attempting to develop a practical instrument based on experience gained with the consultative approach described above. This instrument is intended to reflect the status of the various energy fields shown in Table II without recourse to an expert for analysis, interpretation etc. To this end, a reworking of the names used for energy fields shown in Table II was first carried out; the new designations are shown in Table III. These revised names reflect feedback from pilot studies carried out with a large insurance company, and were intended to render the instrument more accessible and acceptable in typical organizational settings.

The assessment technique is again intended to be based on a relatively brief instrument which poses questions to stakeholders related to their perceptions of the state of the seven energy-related fields. As with the F/W/C-P instrument, a Likert scale is used, and employees polled simply tick off their appreciation of the relevant status of the organization in relation to the statement posed. The instrument is administered in a manner similar to that for the F/W/C-P

model. An example of statements related to the seven energy fields is presented in Table IV. It is an objective of our programme of work to apply this new instrument to yield quantitative measures, although this work is currently only exploratory.

Analyses of the results typically involve calculation of mean, median, mode, maximum, minimum and outliers on scores on each statement and for a field as a whole. These statistics are then transferred to a "kite" diagram whose vectors represent the seven fields. An example is shown in Figure 4. Overall balance for the fields and individual field strengths and "hot spots" are readily identified and can then be related to the generic interpretations identified above. In this manner it is hoped that organizational practitioners will be able to readily assess the status and progress of their efforts to build a learning organization. For example, we are currently researching the ease with which changes in the scores and their patterns can be interpreted by non-expert practitioners, and we are currently researching development of generic interpretations ("archetypes") of certain patterns of response.

Table III Approach B - reworked energy field designations

Old designation	New designation	Areas of organizational relevance (examples)
Existence	Existence	Resources, skills, infrastructure
Action	Activity	Excellence, enthusiasm, results orientation
Order	Control	Structures, roles, plans, goals
Heart	Community	Relationships, politics, openness, humanism
Truth	Meaning	Values, beliefs, communication
Insight	Integration	System, totality, synergy, wisdom
Spirit	Inspiration	Vision, spirit, idealism, service

Table IV Sample statements from an approach B evaluation instrument (participants respond on a Likert scale – strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Existence-related:
- This organization has what it takes to survive
- We have the resources to do our job

Activity-related
- There is a buzz of energy in my workplace
- When there is a problem we get it out in the open

Control-related:
- I rarely feel lost when I'm at work
- There is a feeling of order and focused energy in my workplace

Community-related:
- People relate easily to others
- My heart is in my work

Meaning-related:
- My fellow workers and I share key values
- I am not afraid to say what I feel
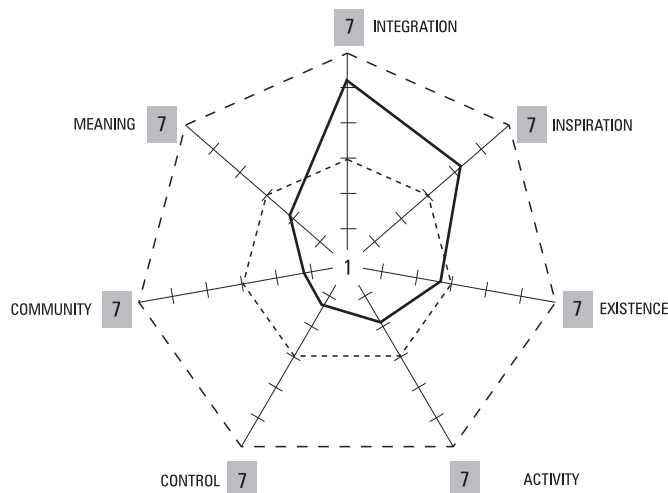
Integration-related:
- Learning is valued more than just getting it right
- I am respected here as a whole person

Inspiration-related:
- I often feel inspired in this organization
- This organization has a role in serving humanity

Figure 4 Measurement template

Correlation between approaches A and B

We are currently exploring correlations between approach A – performance system settings of the three "fields" Focus, Will and Capability, and approach B – the organizational outcomes of those settings as measured through the seven energy states. It is hoped that through an improved understanding of the relationship between the two approaches, in-house organizational practitioners may more reliably interpret the instruments, and more readily undertake design and remedial activities.

Conclusion

In parts 1 and 2 of this article we have considered the issue of assessment of progress towards the "learning organization" ideal which we consider critical to making headway in wide-scale learning organization development. This appears to be a problematic task in several respects, not least being the difficulty with specifying the concept of "learning", and we have argued that assessment is inherently a political and heuristic process.

The notion of field theory, as expounded for example in Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*' (Wheatley, 1992), gives a possible way forward. We have outlined our understanding of this perspective and its relationship to two emergent frameworks for assessment. Our approach is to explore assessment of the nature of organizational

"fields"; suffice to say for now that the instruments assess the qualities of "fields" and do not aim to measure "learning". Learning is seen as an emergent property of the system rather than a variable to be controlled directly, or a phenomenon that can be measured directly.

In terms of the political nature of these forms of assessment, here we can only comment briefly that our bias is towards tools that can be used in the spirit of collaborative enquiry, akin to the approach to organizational change described by Marshall and McLean (Reason 1988).

Our continuing research will generate further empirical data for the development and critique, correlation and possible integration, of these tools. We acknowledge that the linkage between the assumptions behind these tools, and the data they are likely to yield, demands careful examination.

As we indicated in part 1, our overall purpose in this paper is twofold. First, to recount our attempts to provide simple discriminant techniques for learning organization assessment. This is a work in progress, and we cannot claim at this point to have validated all aspects of techniques we discuss. Second, we hope to stimulate interest in evaluation of learning organization variables and to open a dialogue concerning the practicality and theoretical efficacy of viewing learning organisations from a "New Science" (Wheatley, 1992) point of view in order to operationalize such discriminants.

It is our hope that through this two-part publication, other practitioners will be encouraged to try the methods and, if validated, popularize, and further extend them. We are also concerned to form communities of practice in this topic with others who would be prepared to partner with us, and with one another, in further exploration of these techniques.

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Further reading

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