Can the Army Become a Learning Organization?

A QUESTION REEXAMINED

By Anthony J. DiBella

In 1994, after serving as an organizational consultant for General Gordon Sullivan, then – U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Margaret Wheatley wrote an article about the U.S. Army becoming a learning organization. Wheatley, a new-age social scientist and author of Leadership and the New Science, had been solicited by Sullivan to see how the Army could benefit from the buzz about learning organizations that was then sweeping corporate America. It has been 15 years since that writing, during which time there has been a great deal of research on learning organizations. This article revisits the title of Wheatley’s essay in light of recent research and military experience.1 In doing so, it lays out an integrated approach for building learning capability in any organizational setting, large or small, military or otherwise.

Over the years, the U.S. military has won more wars than it has lost, but has had to do so with changing tactics in the context of changing circumstances, be they political, economic, or social-cultural. For some time, it has been recognized that the Army is apt to face a growing diversity and number of missions, and it was that sense of urgency in
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**National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 Fifth Avenue SW Bg 64 Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319**

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the 1990s that prompted General Sullivan to focus on the Service’s need to learn. The latest admonition for this requirement appears in the preface to the Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual. It reaffirms the need to change and adapt as a perennial requirement of our military, a thesis reflected in this statement from General David Petraeus:

“We’ve been reminded through hard experience that it’s imperative to continue to learn and adapt . . . to identify and share lessons learned and best practices; and to strive to ensure that our units are learning organizations. What works today may not work tomorrow; we must remain alert to that reality.”

In citing Wheatley back in 1994, Sullivan claimed that the Army already was a learning organization. If that was indeed the case, why was it so slow to respond to the Iraqi insurgency, and why Petraeus’s recent reaffirmation? One explanation may be that Sullivan’s focus was force structure, while Petraeus’s concern has been strategy and tactics. It is one thing to have a nimble and more easily deployable force, but it is another to have a force whose approach to combat is improvisational. Another explanation may be a lack of understanding about the Army’s learning capabilities.

A Matter of Perspective
It is difficult to know what Generals Sullivan and Petraeus know about learning organizations. However, it is clear that they are big advocates of them. The learning organization concept was popularized by Peter Senge, who described it, in part, as a “place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire.” Unfortunately, with popularity came pretentiousness and vulgarity and efforts by many scholars and practitioners to redefine the concept or reconceptualize it altogether. For some, Senge’s definition sounded too grandiose or Pollyannaish and thus was not taken seriously. Others offered definitions and methodologies to make the concept actionable. For example, David Garvin defined a learning organization as one “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.” Even more simply, Peter Kline and Bernard Saunders defined a learning organization as “a viable and vital means for developing a culture of high performance learners.”

As the number of definitions of the learning organization grew, several clear themes emerged. Among them was the distinction and interdependence of individual level learning and organizational learning, and that one could not exist without the other. Another theme was that learning is linked to adaptation, whether to external events or knowledge gained internally through experience. One point of commonality was the necessity for organizations to learn. That sense of urgency was first characterized by Arie de Geus, who claimed that the only sustainable way to stay ahead of one’s competitors was to learn faster than they did. In essence, that concept underlies General Petraeus’s approach to counterinsurgency. One must be as flexible and adaptive as one’s foes, if not more.

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Over time, practitioner focus has shifted from definitions to techniques and methodologies, and three approaches or perspectives have emerged: normative, developmental, and capability. Within the normative school, learning organizations are viewed as a particular type of organization characterized by a specific set of internal conditions. Learning does not occur spontaneously or naturally since organizations resist change and invest in activities that have immediate impact rather than those whose impact is uncertain or long-term. However, with deliberate effort, leaders and managers can and should build learning organizations. In the developmental perspective, learning organizations can be realized through the strategic actions of their leaders but only through a progression of stages, whether by evolutionary or revolutionary means. In effect, learning organizations develop as a function of their own lifecycles such that learning styles vary over time. Typically, the learning characteristics of a startup will differ from those of a well-established organization operating in a more stable environment. For example, the creation of U.S. Africa Command as an entirely new structural entity within the Department of Defense provides new possibilities for learning compared to those in existing combatant commands.

Both the normative and developmental perspectives focus on the problems and difficulties in promoting learning in organizations. When organizations fail to establish the necessary conditions, they suffer from learning disabilities. These disabilities occur due to the fundamental ways in which individuals have been trained to think and act and from barriers to discovering and utilizing solutions to organizational problems. Organizations
fail to learn because it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the long-term consequences of their actions and decisions due to time lags. Learning is avoided when leaders attribute failure not to internal causes but to conditions in the external environment or to factors that cannot be controlled. Organizations may suffer from amnesia (lack of organizational memory), superstition (biased interpretation of experience), paralysis (inability to act), and schizophrenia (lack of coordination among organizational constituencies).  

Rather than focusing on why learning is problematic for organizations, another approach considers how learning is innate to organizations. In this third perspective (capability), the concept of a learning organization is as redundant as the notion of a breathing mammal. The focus is not on becoming a learning organization but on learning processes that already exist. Learning processes are embedded in organizational culture and structure, both formal and informal, and there is no one best way for organizations to learn.

From this perspective, the question by Wheatley is misleading, if not outright nonsensical. More appropriate questions would be: How does the Army learn and why? What does it learn? And how is that learning aligned with its mission and strategy? The balance of this article presents a methodology for addressing these questions using an approach that integrates insights from each of the three perspectives.

An Integrated Approach

The first step in developing the Army as a learning system is to recognize its profile of current learning capability. The second is to specify a profile that is more aligned with its strategic objectives. The third is the formulation of a change management plan to bridge any gaps. This approach incorporates the capability perspective that the Army has a culture, and embedded within that culture is a patterned set of processes that promote learning. Of course, it could be suggested that the Army is not simply a single culture but a series of subcultures (for example, intelligence, artillery, armor), and learning varies between different functional units. Consequently, one can view the Army as having a portfolio of learning practices.

Existing learning patterns reflect learning styles, and these may be developed over time. Normative factors set the conditions for learning to occur. A strictly normative approach would only focus on normative factors. In fact, that is exactly the approach taken in an assessment of the Army War College that utilized Senge’s normative model.  

Research has validated an integrated framework that can be used to assess or profile overall learning capability.  It consists of a set of 17 elements, 7 descriptive learning orientations, and 10 normative facilitating factors. This model has been tested and used in a variety of contexts and is depicted simply in figure 1.

Learning Orientations

Learning Orientations (LOrs) represent the ways learning takes place and the nature of what is learned. These orientations reflect patterns that shape an organization’s learning capability. Each LOr is a bipolar continuous dimension with no judgment made as to correct position along each continuum. Different organizations will exhibit different orientations, and the combination of positions on all seven LOrs reflects learning styles. Figure 2 shows the set of seven LOrs that in aggregate depict the critical dimensions of learning capability.

Organizations gain knowledge directly through the experiences of their own personnel and indirectly through the experiences of other organizations. These contrasting approaches are captured by the first LOr, Knowledge Source: one approach reflects internal sources, the other external ones. The Center for Army Lessons Learned is a repository of insights gained from after-action reviews. Its focus is internal in that the lessons are from the United States rather than foreign militaries. On the other hand, the United States has learned about counter-insurgency from the British, who represent an external source.

The second LOr, Content-process Focus, refers to the preference for knowledge related to the nature of what the organization does as opposed to knowledge about the processes.
whereby its mission is accomplished. The Army, much like the rest of American society, is action oriented. That translates into an orientation toward knowing what needs to be done (content or mission focus) and doing it rather than reflecting on how to do it (process focus).

Where does the knowledge within the Army reside? Is it in the heads of its officers or in written-down policies and procedures? The third LOr, Knowledge Reserve, reflects these preferences and patterns. If an officer wanted to access, for example, what the Army has learned about special tactics, would he look up the rules of engagement in Army Knowledge Online or phone a fellow West Point graduate now serving in special operations? The answer to that question would point toward the Army’s dominant orientation.

Quite separate from the location of an organization’s knowledge is the means whereby that knowledge is accessed and disseminated. This characteristic is captured by the fourth LOr, Dissemination Mode. The publication of this article in a journal represents formal dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, serendipitous meetings and conversations in officers’ clubs throughout the world are an informal mode of disseminating knowledge.

One common issue in the literature on organizational learning is the distinction between single- and double-loop learning. The contrast pertains to knowledge about how the nature of the conflict had radically changed to asymmetric warfare. That knowledge may be based on different assumptions about tactics and would be transformative in scope (cell 2: innovation).

By analyzing its experience, a team or Service branch can correct mistakes and errors and thereby make incremental improvements to actions already designed and implemented (see figure 3, cell 1: correction).

When an organization conducts research to promote completely new ways of working or doing, it rethinks what it does, why, and how. For example, developing the Future Combat System requires new knowledge and new insights into combat.

Figure 3. Learning Style as Determined by Knowledge Source and Learning Scope

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Knowledge Source</th>
<th>Incremental Learning Scope</th>
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<td>adaptation</td>
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<tr>
<th>External Knowledge Source</th>
<th>Transformative Learning Scope</th>
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<td>correction</td>
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personnel. Rather than reinventing the wheel, so to speak, organizations with significant financial resources may find it easier and more efficient to simply go out to the external environment (external Knowledge Source) and purchase the capability they desire (cell 4: acquisition). For example, if a company in the private sector developed a new weapons system, the Army could go out and purchase it. This approach would be much more cost-effective compared to the Army developing the system from scratch.

The template of seven LOrs provides insight into the processes whereby learning occurs in an organization. A complete set of seven data points, one for each LOr, depicts in a descriptive way any organization’s learning profile. Such data does not indicate the speed whereby learning is taking place or whether the learning is aligned with the strategy of the organization. However, it does provide a baseline to understand current learning capability and a platform to discuss desired capability, which is promoted by normative elements.

Normative Side: Facilitating Factors

The second major aspect of understanding and developing organizational learning capability relates to the inherent difficulties in changing organizations. Learning is apt to challenge established ways of doing things. Learning also takes resources and attention away from activities that are seen as more productive. Consequently, a great deal of research has been conducted to identify those factors that promote learning or establish conditions in which learning is more apt to occur.

Focusing on this aspect brings us to the normative side of the model. For example, Senge advocates for five disciplines (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, systems thinking) that he claims promote learning organizations.21 These elements are not disciplines in the academic sense but are five skill areas required for learning to occur. In another learning model, Garvin claims that learning organizations are skilled at systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from experience, and transferring knowledge.22 Other lists can be found in the writings of other learning advocates. What they share is an emphasis on prescription—that if certain skills or conditions are not present, learning will not occur.

If there is one common trait of learning organizations, it is that information and knowledge flows freely up, down, and across the organization. Good news travels fast, and bad news travels faster. One way in which this characteristic has been captured is with the term Climate of Openness.23 It reflects the permeability of boundaries such that knowledge essential to learning is shared, not hoarded or hidden. Through knowledge-sharing, people working together can learn from and with one another. Lessons from experience, successes, and failures can be applied to improve performance. Climate of Openness also reflects the freedom that individuals feel to express their opinions or debate issues that affect the organization’s overall effectiveness.

In organizations that lack a Climate of Openness, the organization covers up mistakes, errors, and accidents. Absent learning, organizations replicate the past and fail to improve performance. It would take an empirical study to fully investigate the extent to which Climate of Openness is a characteristic of the Army or any other institution. However, it is possible to consider some key traits that constrain learning in light of military culture.

Climate of Openness has been a focal point of Chris Argyris. He has argued that organizational learning is severely limited by the tendency of people to act defensively and to overlook or hide errors to avoid punishment.24 This tendency is compounded by the need to defer to those in authority or establish conditions in which decisions being made based on experience are right.

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or why learning occurs, as indicated by facilitating factors such as Climate of Openness, is what gets learned. Organizations that learn to design or implement strategies that are misaligned with organizational demands or missions serve no institutional purpose (even though such action may benefit some stakeholders with a vested interest in the status quo). Likewise, organizations may engage in dysfunctional or superstitious learning whereby biases and subjective judgments override experience or objective realities.27

For organizations to learn strategically, learning resources and processes need to be directed toward the attainment of the organization’s mission and strategy for achieving it. The military issues a variety of strategy documents including the National Military Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Quadrennial Defense Review. Often, the implications of these strategies for force structure are clear. What is not explicit is the set of skills, competencies, and knowledge the military needs to implement its strategies. Understanding an organization’s learning profile provides a guide to the most effective way such competencies can be learned.

The U.S. Army is an institution whose competence centers around the learning of its officers from their enrollment in its war colleges to participation in after-action reviews. Men and women learn in various ways: by reading books, interacting with peers, and listening to lectures. Organizational learning gets to the capacity of the Army as an institution and its ability as a social system to learn from experience.

Since Margaret Wheatley first posed the question about the Army becoming a learning organization, research has suggested that while the question is provocative, it is not the right one to ask. Several Army publications have since implicitly considered the question by focusing primarily on normative models.28 Instead of seeing the learning organization concept from a normative, one-way-fits-all perspective, a more generative, systems approach respects the idiosyncratic nature of all institutions while acknowledging that learning processes are embedded in all organizations.

By understanding and utilizing how the Army learns, we can more readily promote new ways of combating our foes. For example, if our military and political leaders ordain that the Army learn counterinsurgency, then our Army leaders need to know what learning approaches can best make that happen. A formal dissemination approach might be as simple as printing up a lot of counterinsurgency manuals and passing them out among the troops. A more informal style could utilize online social networks and blogs.

The Army is not and will never be one monolithic learning organization. However, if learning advocates take an integrated approach, they will recognize the complexity of the Army in its portfolio of learning orientations and practices. An important key is how the elements in the portfolio complement one another and how they enable our defense establishment to maintain security in times that are forever evolving. JFQ

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