Learning Organization Characteristics Assessment

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I. Introduction

Project Goal
The goal of our project is threefold – it seeks to 1) research and understand fundamental best practices for learning organizations; 2) work with a participating organization to analyze and assess the extent to which select learning organization characteristics can be observed within it and 3) in turn provide the organization with an analysis including actionable recommendations for enhancing certain learning characteristics.

Summary of Approach
To accomplish our goal we have broken down our efforts (and this paper) into the three basic components of Research, Observation/Assessment, and Actionable Recommendations:

- **Research.** In addition to relevant research regarding learning organizations the project team also conducted additional research on topics such as systems thinking and team learning. The project team also interviewed additional organizational consultants to glean their perspectives on best practices in analyzing organizational learning characteristics in a team.

- **Observation/Assessment.** For the observation and assessment portion of our project we were able to work with the Nashville branch of [TTL, Inc.](http://www.ttlinc.com), an environmental engineering firm that provides geotechnical engineering, analytical laboratory work, materials testing and environmental consulting services primarily in the Southeast U.S. For the assessment portion we asked [employees](http://www.ttlinc.com) to take an [online learning organization survey](http://www.business-review.com) based on the *Harvard Business Review* article "Is Yours a Learning Organization?" by [Amy Edmondson](http://www.amyedmondson.com), [David Garvin](http://www.davidgarvin.com), & [Francesca Gino](http://www.ginotalks.com) (Garvin et. al. 2008). We also conducted an onsite observation of a regularly scheduled branch office team meeting where we were able to audio record the meeting so that a more detailed analysis of the dialogue/language used in the conversations could be conducted. The individual survey results were then reviewed and compared against the observations from the meeting in order to identify learning organization characteristics that may be beneficial for further exploration by [TTL].

- **Actionable Recommendations.** Based upon the research, assessment, and observations conducted our team has created a set of actionable recommendations for the consideration of [TTL].

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1 A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring and retaining knowledge and ideas, and at purposefully modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights (David Garvin)
II. Research - Best Practices in Learning Organizations

*Individuals in the Learning Organization*

The building of a learning organization is an ongoing process. Organizations that learn require a commitment to knowledge and understand the hard task at hand. Implementation will take time and communication between all sectors. Leaders may need to discover new ways of leading and every member must be dedicated to the task of learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002; Senge, 2006).

Organizations must have an efficient and well-developed plan to maximize their potential. This plan should enforce and develop a culture within the organization that will promote learning. Senge (2006) lays out a plan for individual learning in five disciplines that when supported by the organization may lead to organizational learning. The five disciplines are Personal Mastery, Shared Vision, Mental Models, Team Learning, and Systems Thinking. Senge (2006) likens the structure of the disciplines to a three-legged stool; which, with any discipline removed would not allow the stool to stand (figure 1).

![Figure 1: A Model of Senge's Five Disciplines (Senge, 2006)](image)

Personal mastery is a necessity for a learning organization because it drives people towards results. It involves allowing creative tension to drive individuals to work towards achieving their greater visions. A vision is no good unless it drives action. Personal mastery helps promote a clear vision for the organization and dictates a focused energy in achieving this vision. As leaders throughout the organization develop their vision everyone must come together and form a unified vision.

Shared vision answers the question, “What do we want to create?” (Senge, 2006, p. 192). It is not enough in an organization that individuals have a sense of their own internal drive. They must understand where the vision of the organization is taking them. “Shared vision…provides the focus and energy for learning” (Senge, 2006, p. 192). A shared vision that permeates the organization gives power to the individuals.

Dialogue is the essence of learning. Its purpose is to help everyone gain a deeper understanding beyond any single understanding. One must communicate and address issues with a purpose, not just going through the motions. Dialogue is a way of stepping away to look at our thoughts from a distance. It requires openness and there must be a realist approach and willingness to confront the true issues. In the process of dialogue people often become aware of inconsistencies in thinking; leading to greater learning.
Dialogue can help surface deep held perceptions about how our environment operates known as mental models. These mental models are a habituated understanding of the world in which we operate. Most of the time these models serve us very well, the danger is that we often unknowingly apply them and they hold us to familiar ways of being. It is important in a learning organization that mental models are brought to the surface and examined. This examination allows us to see the complexities and learn where our understanding needs to be altered. It has been to the chagrin of many managers that unexplored mental models have thwarted a change.

The fifth discipline, Systems Thinking, ties the other four disciplines together, bridging the four parts into a whole. Systems thinking examines inherit complexity. It identifies patterns that are seen continuously throughout business from growth cycles to balance cycles and the delays that are incorporated in them. It allows organizations to see and recognize these patterns and emulate the successful ones while avoiding the harmful.

The five disciplines lay groundwork for developing an organization that learns through its people. Incorporating these basic principles into large organizations is easier said than done. To first incorporate these pillars, organizations must integrate learning into the work place. There cannot be, as Senge (2006) puts it “a fragmentation,” between learning and working; these two must be incorporated together. People must also connect to the core of the business; to truly buy in and be committed to the business they must be passionate about what the company stands for.

Leaders in the Learning Organization
Beyond strategies, vision statements, and formalized goals, learning organizations need unique leaders. Leaders, who are more than managers and executives, but individuals throughout an organization who bring power and the ability to sustain change. Building a learning organization takes extreme commitment. That commitment involves shedding the old way of thinking about leadership and seeing where leaders exist throughout the organization. Senge (2006) proposes decentralized leadership by identifying three levels where critical leadership is necessary: at the line level, network level, and executive level. In addition, Senge (2006) suggests we change how we view leaders and see leaders in a new light as designers, teachers, and stewards.

The way we view leaders should occur alongside where we view leaders. Leaders exist in all functional areas of an organization. Line leaders are the working leaders. They have the knowledge of how changes are supposed to be implemented and the desired outcome. These leaders are responsible for supporting change and garnering support from others (Senge, 2006).

Network leaders connect and spread ideas. These leaders create a web of interconnectedness between line leaders of different groups ensuring the transfer of knowledge. Network leaders also leverage connections outside the company to promote growth and positive transfer of knowledge. These leaders inspire learning and make sure the needed connections exist to facilitate learning (Senge, 2006).

Executive leaders are responsible for shaping and creating the environment for learning. More than just barking orders or single handedly making decisions executive leaders act as working examples of the organization they eventually create. Realizing ideas can come from any area in an organization,
leaders of learning organizations create environments in which creativity and learning are supported (Senge, 2006).

The leader as a designer is not so much like an architect or a builder standing back from his work. The leader is in the process and part of the process of the design. Senge (2006) identifies being a designer of learning involves acknowledging where needs are not being met and then finding a way to creatively meet that need. In a learning organization, this process does not stop - their leaders must continually reassess and modify the process. The last step is to give the process away and allow others to mold the process to best fit their needs. Senge (2006) leaves us with this thought regarding the leader as the designer, “the hallmark of a good design is the absence of crisis… (pg. 328).”

Teachers who are first learners have the ability to inspire those around them. The leader as a teacher is no different. Leaders who are teachers create space in which others can learn. They inspire others to reach their visions while helping learners identify underlying structures and mental models. Much like the role of leader as designer, leaders as teachers recognize where gaps exist. Once gaps are identified they gather others around them to learn and address the issues (Senge, 2006).

The leader as a steward develops, according to Senge (2006), first with the desire to serve and then out of choice the aspiration to lead. This idea is in contrast with leaders who choose to lead out of a desire for power or money. Stewardship is seen as “serving a larger purpose,” this ideal develops trust and commitment among members.

**Developing the Learning Organization**

Developing a learning organization involves more than just developing new idealistic leaders and implementing processes. Organizational learning involves the whole of the organization. Lipshitz, Popper, and Friedman (2002) posit:

> No organization can truly be classified as a learning organization. Rather, the extent and quality of organizational learning can be determined by assessing the number, variety, and effectiveness of organizational learning mechanisms operating in different units and at different levels as well as by identifying the horizontal and vertical links among OLMs throughout the organization (p. 94).

The organizational learning mechanisms provide an actionable framework for practitioners and researchers. The idea is that productive learning is a product of a multifaceted approach. Creating and sustaining a learning organization requires and involves everyone within the organization (Lipshitz, et al., 2002; Taylor, Templeton, & Baker, 2010).

Lipshitz et al. (2002) strive to identify what conditions make learning productive by proposing a five faceted model.

The structural facet addresses the problem of distinguishing between learning by organizations and learning in organizations. It describes the kinds of organizational arrangements necessary for attributing learning to organizations. The cultural facet specifies normative behaviors that generate productive learning. The psychological
facet specifies psychological states that determine the extent to which individuals enact these behaviors. The policy facet specifies how management can facilitate organizational learning. Finally, the contextual facet specifies features of the organizational or task environment that promote or inhibit organizational learning (p. 80).

Because, “organizations learn only through individuals who learn” it is necessary for the organization to actively promote learning. The sub-facets of this model are helpful in identifying practices that support learning by organizations. Briefly broken out in the structural facet Lipshitz et al. (2002) state that learning becomes organizational when roles, functions, and procedures enable collection, analysis, storage, and the ability to share and use information that is relevant (pg. 82). The cultural facet addresses producing valid information and commitment to change. Five norms have been identified that make up a culture disposed towards learning: transparency, integrity, issue orientation, inquiry, and accountability (Lipshitz et al., 2002). Perhaps the greatest implication is that there are personal costs associated with the norms and achieving productive learning. The psychological facet addresses how people respond to the potential personal costs of productive learning. The organization is responsible for creating an environment where people feel psychologically safe in taking risks and sharing information with others. The policy facet shapes the organizational learning environment. This facet outlines the steps management will take to promote learning. The final facet, contextual, pertains to how management responds to external factors that may or may not be under their control. This facet has much to do with the leadership and how they support change and facilitate learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002).

Figure 2: Facets of Organizational Learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002)
Consultant Interviews / Lessons Learned

Rod Berger, Psy.D.
Dr. Berger is the VP of Education at RANDA Solutions, in the past he has taught Leadership Development at Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management, and was a senior consultant for the ALOC group. He was very helpful on giving us advice on how to recognize an organization that not only wants to go into a change initiative but it is also ready for it. Below are some of his recommendations based on his personal experiences:

Support
According to Dr. Berger, in the early stages of determining if an organization is ready for change is to find out who is supporting the idea. He mentions, there are many times when middle managers want to implement change only to find out halfway through the process that it didn’t have enough support from the front line executives. Also, Dr. Berger recommended finding out what other support mechanisms the organization has gone through in the past. This is important when trying to understand how the organization supports their people and more importantly what that support looks like.

Execution
When decisions are being made at the executive level it is very important to understand how those decisions were made. For example: did it involve the whole C suite? It is also advisable to listen to executives tell their own individual experiences about the change they want to initiate. Dr. Berger explained that there are often times when executives have seen the idea carried out by other companies and have heard of that success but are not aware of what went into it and the circumstances that company was under. By understanding where their motivation for change comes from we can have a clearer vision of where they expect to go.

According to Dr. Berger, the most difficult part is to communicate the idea to the rest of the organization. Upper management needs to understand how this new change will be communicated and what people are going to hear. The way this is done will depend on the type of culture and the level of trust that has been built among the employees. Dr. Berger advises that the organization has to reach a level of trust where employees know they will not get punished from expressing their level of comfort with this new change.

Mr. David Ledgerwood
Mr. Ledgerwood is a data analyst for RANDA Solutions; he was also the founder of ALOC consulting. His previous work includes consulting services with PricewaterhouseCoopers and different entrepreneurial projects. He talked about his own insights gained by working with companies that have experienced change.

According to Mr. Ledgerwood, learning organizations are those which learn on their own. This may look as a simple thing to implement - after all how difficult can it be for employees of a company to learn on their own? Quoting Mr. Ledgerwood “It’s extremely difficult.” Organizations need to understand the value of talent management; an organization starts to become a learning organization the moment it begins recruiting. It has to hire people who have the motivation to support collective sharing and peer mentoring. The level of learning that goes on in an organization also depends on the industry in which it operates, the flexibility of the projects each employee is working on, and employee morale. According to Mr. Ledgerwood, an organization that does not take pride in their
product, service or employees will not feel motivated to take on new changes. He also mentions the importance of knowing the executives’ background when they are the ones trying to implement the change. It is very important to know how and why these executives are at their current positions. Mr. Ledgerwood explains that many times opposition comes from the lack of engagement with the company from executives who were brought in from the outside.

III. Organization Assessment – TTL, Inc.

For the observation and assessment portion of our project we were able to work with the Nashville branch of TTL, Inc. (TTL), an environmental engineering firm that provides geotechnical engineering, analytical laboratory work, materials testing and environmental consulting services primarily in the Southeast U.S.

Assessment Approach

For the learning organization assessment we asked TTL employees, executive level through administrative staff, to take an online learning organization survey based on the Harvard Business Review (“HBR”) article "Is Yours a Learning Organization?” (Garvin et. al. 2008). Of the approximately 25 TTL Nashville branch employees, 11 responded to the survey as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General level within organization</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/Other Staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Technicians</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of TTL Responses by Level

TTL’s results were then compared to the benchmark scores from the original HBR study obtained from surveys of 125 sr. executives from across several industries the results of which were then broken into quartiles by attribute. The median for each attribute occurs where the second and third quartiles meet. Results can be interpreted that, comparatively speaking, scores falling in the top two quartiles may be areas of potential strength for TTL, while those in the bottom two quartiles may be areas for potential improvement.

Definition of Learning Characteristics from the HBR Survey

The HBR survey is designed to look for what it describes as the three basic building blocks of a learning organization. These building blocks and sub-components from the study are summarized below along with what it provides as distinguishing characteristics of each:
### Building Blocks and Sub-Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Blocks and Sub-Components</th>
<th>Distinguishing Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A supportive learning environment</td>
<td>Employees:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Psychological Safety</td>
<td>• Feel safe disagreeing with others, asking naïve questions, owning up to mistakes, and presenting minority viewpoints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appreciation of Differences</td>
<td>• Recognize the value of opposing ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Openness to New Ideas</td>
<td>• Take risks and explore the unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time for Reflection</td>
<td>• Take time to review organizational processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Concrete learning processes</td>
<td>A team or company has formal processes for:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experimentation</td>
<td>• Generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information Collection</td>
<td>• Experimenting with new offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Analysis</td>
<td>• Gathering intelligence on competitors, customers, technological trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education and Training</td>
<td>• Identifying and solving problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information Transfer</td>
<td>• Developing employees’ skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leadership that reinforces learning</td>
<td>The organization’s leaders:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Demonstrate willingness to entertain alternative viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Signal the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer, and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in active questioning and listening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Basic Building Blocks of a Learning Organization**
(Adapted from “Is Yours a Learning Organization - Garvin et. al. 2008”)

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**Survey Results Discussion**
In discussing TTL’s results it is important to remember that the self-assessment survey and our discussion are only guides in facilitating a broader conversation of where TTL may be functioning with particular strength/weakness in terms of being a learning organization as defined above. Its real value is its ability to help draw out, compare, and focus on specific performance areas that may yield the highest investment returns for TTL.

The following shows TTL’s score average when accounting for all surveys submitted, and then mapped against the HBR study benchmark score quartiles:
In looking at the composite summary scores at the far left of the chart where the three primary building block categories are displayed, we see strong scores in the supportive leadership and learning environment categories, while the learning process score dips. This is potentially indicative of an organization that, while having overall strong cultural and leadership characteristics, is likely not capitalizing or leveraging the knowledge that exists ad hoc in the organization. Interestingly however, when viewing the scores broken out by respondents’ general level within the organization we see that there are likely strong “cultural pockets” that exist in the organization. The following chart displays the highest overall scoring category of employee compared to the lowest overall scoring category of employee:
As can be seen clearly here, there is a significant difference between the perceptions of the Field Technicians who consistently assess above the \textit{average} and the OfficeLeadership who regularly assess below the \textit{average}. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn right away, other than an obvious difference of viewpoint, a focused discussion around possible contributing factors and context may yield valuable insights for \textit{average}. For example, fresh exploration of the following questions may be helpful in producing insight:

1. What contexts/factors are in play that account for the large difference between the two groups’ perceptions?
2. What lessons-learned and principles inherent to the Field Technicians’ modus operandi are transferable to the environment/context of the office setting?
3. What factors appear to be universal across the branch? What is contributing to those factors’ successful translation across the many different job function contexts?
4. What factors are in play that would make the two different groups score so \textit{close together} in the categories of “psychological safety” and “openness to new ideas”, but so \textit{far apart} on “appreciation of differences”?

The survey results and their potential implications are interesting enough on their own, but become even more so when we compare them with observations obtained from the \textit{staff meeting} we were able to attend.

\textit{Meeting Observations Discussion}

\textit{TTL} agreed to allow us to conduct an onsite observation of a regularly scheduled branch office team meeting where we were able to audio record the meeting so that a more detailed analysis of the dialogue could be conducted. The key observations from the meeting were then reviewed and compared against the survey results in an attempt to identify further insight to their potential significance. We do not attempt to recount the entirety of the meeting here, only key observations noted. Please note that observations are based on a \textit{one time visit only} and are not intended necessarily to be indicative of any ongoing patterns of behavior (“good” or “bad”).

\textit{General Meeting Environment}

The meeting observed was a weekly staff meeting which is held every Monday at 8 a.m. It lasted approximately an hour and 15 minutes and was attended by all branch personnel not currently in the field, executive level through administrative. The agenda for the meeting is the same every week and consists of the following:

- Branch Manager’s update
  - Branch Manager shares any pertinent information she feels they all need to know and/or charges to the team.
- Office management
  - Lead Admin covers office details such as invoicing, etc.
- Weekly safety topic
- “Larry’s senior moment”
  - Larry, one of the branch’s most senior professionals shares brief “words of wisdom” (this is relatively new to the agenda having only started about a month prior)
- Review of the professional project list
Open review of all active projects including resource needs, quality control requirements, etc.

- Construction materials testing workload
- Business development (only every 2-3 weeks)

This weekly meeting is generally the only time all staff members are together and its primary goal is to facilitate the sharing of important information, understand where help is needed across the different areas of responsibility, and to “spark thoughts on where [they] may help each other be successful”.

**Room Setup**

The meeting is held in a standard conference room around a large oval table. A laptop on the conference table is connected to a large flat panel screen at the front of the room which is used to facilitate the active review and editing of team documents (schedules, presentations, etc.). Overall the meeting space is comfortable and conducive to discussion.

**Relational Atmosphere**

Overall, we observed what appeared to be a pleasant, familial, relaxed, and professional environment during the meeting. The meeting participants all appeared to have good rapport with one another and hierarchy, while observable, did not appear to have an overly negative impact on interactions (e.g. we observed staff able to freely joke with the COO who arrived a few minutes late and sat against the wall). However, we also noted a lab technician who had arrived early enough to sit at the main table but opted to sit against the wall by the door and generally was not an active participant in the meeting.

On the wall at the front of the room – two signs are present: “Extraverts will…” and “Introverts will…”, each followed by a few quick distinguishing bullets on characteristics. Overall, it appeared as if there was an espoused interest in understanding and fostering quality team member interactions.

**“Daily Report Implementation”**

Four days prior to the meeting [redacted] had implemented a new daily reporting procedure/requirement. Before diving into regular agenda, the Branch Manager set time aside to discuss how it was going so far in its very early stages. The tone of the Branch Manager was easy and we believe the reciprocated ease of responses by the meeting participants supports the high survey scores seen for [redacted] in the categories of “Leadership that reinforces learning”, and “Learning environment”, as well as the “Psychological Safety”. The following verbatim excerpt highlights key components of the conversation which lead us to this conclusion. It is followed by a listing of the learning organization characteristic building blocks from the survey which we see reinforced:

- **Branch Manager:** I wanted to get a little feedback before we moved on, on the daily report implementation...how’s that going?

- **Jr. Professional Staff Member:** It’s kinda tough but it’s doable...

[The staff member goes on to freely admit he’s one of those who usually struggle with timely reporting and the comment is met by friendly laughter from the team. The Branch Manager invites more discussion…]
• **Branch Manager:** *So it’s tough but doable...?*

[This statement causes more open discussion among the team on what’s working and what’s not.]

• **Branch Manager:** *Where have we had challenges – anything that’s consistently a challenge? I know we’ve only been doing this four days, but I wanted to continue to keep it on the forefront.*

[The Branch Manager leaves space for peer conversation among the staff and they engage in several minutes of information sharing, including potential ways to work around identified issues. The Branch Manager does not dominate the conversation and most discussion is between staff. She then expresses her appreciation at end of listening to the discussion and moves to the next agenda item.]

**Building Blocks Reinforced**

We observed this exchange as particularly reinforcing of §’s relatively high scores in the following learning organization characteristic building blocks from the survey:

• Building Block 1: Supportive Learning Environment - Psychological Safety:
  ➢ People in this unit are eager to share information about what does and doesn’t work

• Building Block 3: Leadership That Reinforces Learning:
  ➢ My managers invite input from others in discussions
  ➢ My managers ask probing questions

**“Setting Client Contact Goals”**

Immediately following the relatively positive and seemingly upbeat exchange that explored the challenges associated with the Daily Report Implementation initiative, we observed what we felt was a very distinct, if not abrupt, shift in tone and approach from the Branch Manager moving into the next agenda item. The Branch Manager delivered a unilateral announcement with what we observed as a somewhat “tired” tone and no discussion was invited or took place. We did not observe this “approach shift” occurring by the Branch Manager at any other point in the meeting and found it particularly interesting given §’s previously noted high scores in “Leadership That Reinforces Learning”.

The agenda item was regarding a March 1st deadline for staff professionals to submit client contact goals that were the result of a recent strategic planning meeting. The following verbatim represents the entirety of the Branch Manager’s statement and is followed by our discussion of potential questions and hypotheses which may be beneficial for further exploration by the Branch Manager:

• **Branch Manager:** *“Ummm...There was a March 1st deadline from the Strategic Planning Meeting for those people to let me know, for Professionals to let me know, um, what their plan was for client contact...I received a zero. The goal of the strategic action item was for*
everybody to set a client contact goal, whatever that is, and a method of tracking….this could be accomplished as a team, individually, whatever you want to do. Um that went out on the email I sent out following the strategic planning meeting….with the action items,….deadlines were on that, you might want to revisit that email. If you need it I’ll be happy to send it out again, but um, those client contact goals…are due. Ok?”

[With very slight sigh in voice the Branch Manager calls immediately on two others to start next agenda item – no discussion takes place.]

Questions/Hypotheses for Further Exploration
Several questions come to mind that we believe may be helpful in uncovering the mental models and/or other factors contributing to this curious shift in tone and approach: What’s contributing to the Branch Manager’s lack of inquiry toward the staff regarding the missed deadline? What factors are in play that no room is left for staff responses before moving to the next agenda item? Is the Branch Manager privately holding certain assumptions that make this approach seem appropriate – and is the switch conscious or unconscious? Does she believe she has anything relationally/professionally at stake in the “success” or “failure” of the conversation in that moment?

The following hypotheses are offered as potential starting places to help facilitate the exploration of these questions. Please note that these are hypotheses for discussion purposes only and not intended as “diagnoses”:

• The Branch Manager may very well believe she already “knows the answer” to why the response rate is zero and thus believes that no inquiry is needed. If this is the case, there is still a likely benefit in addressing her assumption regarding “the answer” with the group to further test her reasoning and/or mitigate ongoing delays in response.

• Whereas the previous Daily Implementation Reporting discussion seems a more arm’s length issue for the Branch Manager (e.g. her use of “we” and “how’s that going?”), this discussion seems more personally owned/vested by her (e.g. her use of “let me know….”, “I received a zero”, “…the email I sent…”, and “…I’ll be happy to send it out again.”). Perhaps this is because strategy issues tend to be owned at the leadership level, nonetheless, the close ownership of the task may be overly influencing her approach to discussion.

• The Branch Manager may believe that a significant amount of side-bar or “chatter” conversation has taken place among staff, that opinions are formed, entrenched and/or emotionally charged, and now is not the time or venue to engage those conversations.

• Our two members’ presence as observers and the recording taking place may have lessened the Branch Managers desire to engage in a potentially confrontational discussion with her staff.

On a separate but related note, we believe the survey results support an additional hypothesis to test regarding why the response rate was zero to begin with. …’s relatively low scores, particularly for Office Leadership and Professional Staff, in the areas of Learning Process and Experimentation may suggest that the lack of engagement by professional staff could be due to a feeling of being “overwhelmed” by the ambiguity of accomplishing this particular task. These two survey categories
can indicate an organization’s ability to both create and work with new ideas/work methods – especially when considering these related sub-factors:

- Related sub-factor: This unit experiments frequently with new ways of working
- Related sub-factor: This unit frequently employs prototypes or simulations when trying out new ideas

When combined with survey results, the language used by the Branch Manager regarding how the goal was to be accomplished leads us to believe it is possible that, in a likely positive attempt to empower staff, they may have been given a task *too unstructured to be accomplished in the current work environment*, that is, they were given a goal with too little direction in relation to their current skills in dealing with ambiguity. Consider the following excerpt from the Branch Manager’s statement that suggests the task was relatively unstructured – *emphasis added*. Then compare to Figure 5 below:

- **Branch Manager**: “The goal of the strategic action item was for everybody to set a client contact goal, *whatever that is*, and a method of tracking….this could be accomplished as a team, individually, whatever you want to do.”

“Technical Lunch & Learn with Client Organization”
During the meeting it was brought up that had been invited by a client organization to provide a technical lunch and learn event. This particular client was a rather large organization with several different components/functional areas. As such, a healthy discussion ensued on which part of the client organization would make the most sense to focus on for the event.

The conversation centered on finding “low-hanging fruit” where relationships/opportunities were already in place. However, there was also significant focus and commitment to discovering where may be able to add the most value to the organization, including where potential work may be
discovered. Ultimately it was decided to work with the client directly and discuss where the most valuable use of the event within the organization may be.

**Building Blocks Reinforced**

We observed this discussion of extracurricular engagement with clients as particularly reinforcing of the following learning organization characteristic building blocks from the survey:

- Building Block 2: Concrete Learning Processes and Practices - Information Transfer
  - This unit has forums for meeting with and learning from customers and clients

**“Praise for Ben”**

At the very end of the meeting we saw what we believed to be a final significant observation linking back to the *Experimentation* factor of the survey (i.e. the ability to deal with ambiguity to find new ways to solve problems). At the close of the meeting, special time was taken to offer praise for Ben, the Materials Testing Project Manager. Ben was given very high praise for going out of his way to creatively solve a significant client issue with, admittedly by supervisor, “zero” direction from his leadership – the direction given was “Ben, make sure we get this stuff done.” Consider the following excerpts from Ben’s direct supervisor:

- **Ben’s Supervisor:** “I’m so proud of this guy... for taking the bull by the horns; ... it was just beautiful; ... he took it upon himself to... do ALL the coordination”

Interestingly, *Experimentation* is also the same assessment category that [scored relatively low in, and which we previously discussed may have been a factor in the low response rate for client contact goals (see Figure 5).](#)

However, if we recall that Field Technicians (the group we assume Ben worked closest with to solve this particular client issue) scored above the [average in all categories, particularly in *Experimentation*, it begs the question: Are there transferrable lessons and/or values that can be adapted from the Field Technicians’ environment/culture into other groups’ operational contexts? The following figure highlights the Field Technicians’ self-assessment average compared to the [average, particularly around Experimentation:](#)
A Final Note Regarding the Overall Assessment
As a final reminder we ask that the reader please recall that observations are based on a *one time visit only* and are not intended necessarily to be indicative of any ongoing patterns of behavior ("good" or "bad"). Also, any hypotheses regarding cause are *for discussion purposes only* and are not intended to serve as conclusive “diagnoses” of motivation or causality. Our team is fully aware that there are likely several extenuating factors of which we are unaware. However, we offer these observations in good faith as a potential starting place for increasing TTL’s ability to become a more effective learning organization. We sincerely appreciate TTL’s most gracious access to their team members.

IV. Recommendations for TTL, Inc.

Understand and Communicate Your Values
We believe the “praise for Ben” that was observed during the meeting can be an opportunity for learning. As discussed in the previous section Ben was complimented for his autonomy and innovation.

*Are Ben’s actions and character in this particular situation an example of the values that TTL would like to see demonstrated by all of its employees in their varying rolls and contexts?*

We suggest the Branch Manager, field managers, and other appropriate leadership set time aside to discuss in more detail what exact values Ben demonstrated in this particular situation that they would like to see replicated throughout TTL. If it is decided that this value is desired in all employees and not just Ben then managers may benefit from sharing his story, the values demonstrated, and help other employees understand what it may look like for them to behave with similar values in their respective operational contexts. Ben’s action not only showed his autonomy but it also helped solve a problem it faced on that particular day.
It is important to note that the values Ben demonstrated will likely look very different in other departments such as the branch offices. How can these employees demonstrate the value of experimentation and autonomy? Managers and their direct reports should brainstorm together some ways these values could be implemented in varying departments. Having teams brainstorm together will also raise the likelihood of creating a shared vision while enhancing the mindset that this experimental and autonomous behavior could help creatively overcome future difficulties on the job.

Learn From Differing Departmental Cultures
Based on the results of the HBR survey, there was a difference in scores between field technicians and office leaders. In all categories, field technicians scored higher than the average. In all but three categories, office leadership scored below the average. We believe this gap is very interesting and deserves a deeper look:

1. We recommend the branch managers and the field managers meet to discuss these results. Do they believe these results may be representative of any behavioral norms within the branch? It is important to note that we received only 11 responses to the survey – the results may be more insightful if all the employees completed the surveys in order for to have a more accurate picture of the learning environment. If the results still represent a gap, we suggest dig deeper into the issue.

2. The field technicians scored particularly high in Experimentation compared to office leadership. We recognize that this may simply be the result of the nature of the job for field technicians compared to office leadership, i.e. field technicians could have more opportunity for experimentation, while office leadership may perform more “repetitive” tasks that seemingly do not lend themselves to experimentation. If this is true, branch managers should discuss with employees ways in which they can implement experimentation.

This may be a great learning opportunity for if office leadership can glean from field technicians what cultural or structural elements are in play that could be creatively transferred into the office context. We recommend leadership meetings between the two departments and onsite visits to the field for office personnel to explore any key factors that are fostering such an apparently high learning environment among field technicians.

3. Finally, we suggest that after any decisions or initiatives are agreed to that regular team follow-ups be included as part of s weekly meetings for the first 6 months and then quarterly thereafter. After 6 months we suggest a follow up survey be conducted in order to see where improvements to the self-assessments have been made to close gaps.

Encourage Dialogue & Challenge Mental Models
Our observations from the survey results and the onsite meeting lead us believe that is earnestly in pursuit of incorporating a high level of open communication among their team. Thus, we
found it very curious when we observed what we felt was a very distinct, if not abrupt, shift in tone and approach during the “Setting Client Contact Goals” portion of the meeting – an approach we did not observe at any other time (as discussed in detail in Section III). As such, this circumstance provoked our team to discuss ways in which this one moment in time might have been more productive for both the Branch Manager and the other attendees of the meeting.

As discussed in Section II, dialogue can help surface deep held perceptions about how our environment operates known as mental models. While these mental models normally serve us very well, the danger is that we often unknowingly apply them and they hold us to familiar ways of being. It is important in a learning organization that mental models are brought to the surface and examined.

In the case of the “Setting Client Contact Goals” we suggest that the Branch Manager use what Senge refers to as the Left-Hand Column approach. Senge recommends this approach as a powerful technique to help “see” how our mental models operate in a particular situation, how we tend to manipulate situations to avoid dealing with how we actually think and feel, and to help show why dealing with our assumptions more forthrightly is important (Senge, 2006, p. 180).

To conduct the Left-Hand Column exercise a two column grid is created. On the right side of the grid the conversation is recalled as best as possible and written out in the form of a script. On the left hand side the individual writes what they were thinking and feeling while the exchange was taking place. The two column grid’s purpose is to highlight what words are actually being said in relation to the speaker’s thought processes behind them.

Here’s an example conversation to demonstrate how the tool works:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts and Feelings</th>
<th>What Was Said</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa, I look forward to hearing your sweet but paranoid expressions as you try and protect your turf as kindly as possible. Tom, let the justifying of your continued existence in the organization commence. This should be a great time…(sarcasm).</td>
<td>Me: Hi Lisa, Hi Tom. Thanks for taking the time to sit down together today. As you know we want to spend some time exploring thoughts around reintegrating Tom into the department and to see if we might be able to get a sense of the best way to approach it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yikes. Well that was direct. I guess Lisa will be wearing her “tough love” hat today. I’d better get out in front of this before Tom gets ridiculously defensive.</td>
<td>Lisa: I really just think that all the support I need going forward under the reorganization is more administrative in nature and doesn’t warrant a full blown senior level staffer like Tom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep them under control. Keep them under control. Keep them under control.</td>
<td>Me: Well, I know there’s been a lot swirl around the role of the department in the larger reorg so maybe it would be a good idea to spend a little time first fleshing out how you each see the department’s vision evolving. That might help us remove some ambiguity and outline any key assumptions regarding resourcing needs. Would that be ok?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Left-Hand Column tool allows an individual to better understand how they may be avoiding real issues at work in the conversation. This tool may be beneficial to the Branch Manager and other
attendees of the meeting in terms of obtaining a more comprehensive view of their unique perspectives surrounding the client contact goals conversation and what thoughts/issues likely remain unaddressed.

Below we have created a Left-Hand Column template for use in examining the “Setting Client Contact Goals” exchange:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts and Feelings</th>
<th>What Was Said</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insert thoughts/feelings at specific points here...</strong></td>
<td><strong>Branch Mgr:</strong> Ummm…There was a March 1st deadline from the Strategic Planning Meeting for those people to let me know, for Professionals to let me know, um, what their plan was for client contact…I received a zero. The goal of the strategic action item was for everybody to set a client contact goal, whatever that is, and a method of tracking….this could be accomplished as a team, individually, whatever you want to do. Um that went out on the email I sent out following the strategic planning meeting….with the action items,…deadlines were on that, you might want to revisit that email. If you need it I’ll be happy to send it out again, but um, those client contact goals…are due. Ok?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[moving directly to next topic]

**Branch Mgr:** Troy..Russell - Safety?

**Troy:** Yes, uh, yes. Uh I wanna go through this…..

By gaining a more holistic understanding of the conversation through the Left-Hand Column tool, the Branch Manager, in addition to other employees at [ ], may be better prepared to engage more directly in future conversations that potentially hold unsavory conversational undercurrents.

**Enhance Symbiotic Client Relationships**

As discussed in Section III, during the meeting it was brought up that [ ] had been invited by a client organization to provide a technical lunch and learn event. A good portion of that conversation in the meeting focused on where [ ] may be able to add the most value to that organization, as well as where potential work may be discovered.

We believe further expanding the nature and range of goals for these types of extracurricular activities will serve as key opportunities for expanding the learning of both [ ] and its clients by creating stronger symbiotic relationships between them.

An article from the Harvard Business Review entitled “Consulting is More Than Giving Advice” discusses the many ways a consultant must encourage a relationship with its client in order to maintain competitive advantage. Creating a symbiotic relationship, in which both the client and consultant understand that each has something to learn from the other, encourages a more personal relationship (Turner 1982). What’s more, this type of invitation also has a way of acknowledging humility in a consulting firm – potentially setting [ ] apart from other consulting firms known for “having all the answers” while providing [ ] with opportunities to gather key insights regarding the strategic landscape of the industry from their clients’ perspective. Therefore it may be worth [ ]’s time to
discuss with its clients their willingness to provide expanded/partnered learning opportunities to and/or with TTL.

**Explore Potential Challenges Associated with Task Autonomy**

As discussed in detail in Section III, we believe the survey results support an additional hypothesis to test regarding *why* the response rate was zero for the client contact goals request. TTL’s relatively low scores in the areas of *Learning Process* and *Experimentation*, particularly for Office Leadership and Professional Staff, may suggest that the lack of deadline compliance by professional staff could be due to a feeling of being “overwhelmed” by the ambiguity of accomplishing this particular task.

1. While this is merely a hypothesis from our team based on the rationale described in Section III, it appears as though the sheer flexibility in the task itself may have been a hindrance to employees such that they could have been unsure how to begin a task with seemingly little structure. A key working assumption we use here (which is of course appropriate to challenge) is that an engineering organization such as TTL has a higher likelihood of becoming acclimated to the existing structured processes and protocols inherent to the engineering environment. With this type of daily operating environment, assigning a task with little structure, other than a deadline, may have left employees struggling to create the requisite structure for the task on their own. Therefore we suggest that TTL leadership address this issue by a) asking more probing questions of the professional staff regarding their lack of deadline compliance and b) should task ambiguity be found as a contributing factor, provide a template for completing the task coupled with a brief discussion on the rationale behind its design which can then be used as a teaching experience on how to structure “unstructured” tasks.

2. Recognizing that task ambiguity may only be a partial factor in the lack of deadline compliance for the getting client contact goals in on time, we would also recommend that TTL leadership discuss openly with team members what other factors that may be in play.

In his book “The Dance of Change”, Peter Senge discusses several common challenges related to change in an organization. In regards to challenges related to *initiating* change (for example establishing a new client contact goal setting process) Senge highlights that while it is important to communicate the change to all employees and explain the reasoning for the change, he says that those implementing the change should be aware of the need to “justify the change” often to employees (Senge 1999).
A few of the most common comments Senge found when employees are resisting change were:

- **This stuff isn't relevant**
  > Senge mentions that in the case of “this stuff isn’t relevant” is made, more communication needs to be made to the employees on the importance of the change

- **This stuff isn't working**
  > This comment requires showing employees the results, and if possible, measurable results, to indicate the progress made with this change

- **They never let us do this stuff**
  > This particular comment Senge describes references a situation in which management may be offering autonomy but may not be acting in a way that promotes this autonomy

With consideration to these additional potential factors, we suggest that the [Branch Manager] further explore, and acknowledge if necessary, any resistance to the client contact goals initiative in order to take further appropriate action.
Works Cited


