The Learning Organization

By Mike Hannan

In its recently completed strategic plan, ISACS (Independent Schools Association of the Central States) identified four principal policy goals: Independence, Accreditation, The Learning Organization, and Services and their Delivery. In this issue of Prep Talk, I would like to explore The Learning Organization.

The Learning Organization: Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do before. Through learning we reperceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be a part of the generative process of life. There is within each of us a deep hunger for this type of learning.

This then is the basic meaning of the learning organization: - an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create. For such an organization it is not enough merely to survive. Survival learning, or what is more commonly called adaptive learning, is important - indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, adaptive learning must be joined by generative learning, learning that enhances our capacity to create.

Metanoia: The word metanoia means shift of the mind. The word has a rich history. For the Greeks it meant a fundamental shift or change, or more literally, a transcendence (meta means above or beyond as in metaphysics) of the mind (noia, from the root nous, of mind).

To grasp the meaning of metanoia is to grasp the deeper meaning of learning, for learning also involves a fundamental shift or movement of the mind. The problem with talking about learning organizations is that the learning has lost its central meaning in contemporary usage. Most people's eyes glaze over if you talk to them about learning or learning organizations.

Little wonder - for, in everyday use, learning has come to be synonymous with taking in information.

Systems Thinking: Systems Thinking is the Fifth Discipline; it is the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. Education and human endeavors are systems. They are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of that lacework ourselves, it's doubly hard to see that whole pattern of change. Indeed we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. System thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that have been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively.
Personal Mastery: Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. As such it is the essential cornerstone of the learning organization—the learning organization's spiritual foundation. An organization's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members. The roots of this discipline lie in both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, and in secular traditions as well.

Surprisingly few adults work to develop rigorously their own personal mastery. When you ask most adults what they want from their lives, they often talk about what they would like to get rid of: "I'd like my mother-in-law to move out," they say or "I'd like my back problems to clear up." The disciple of personal mastery, by contrast, starts with clarifying the things that really matter to us, of living our lives in the service of our highest aspirations.

Here, we are most interested in the connections between personal learning and organizational learning, in the reciprocal commitments between individual and organization, and in the special spirit of an enterprise made up of learners.

Mental Models: Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we see the world and how we take action. Very often we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior. For example, we may notice that a co-worker dresses elegantly, and say to ourselves, "She's a country club person." About someone who dresses shabbily, we may feel, "He doesn't care what others think." Mental models of what can and cannot be done in different management settings are no less deeply entrenched.

The discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward: learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on "learningful" conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others.

Building Shared Vision: If any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, it's the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. One is hard pressed to think of any organization that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organization. IBM had service; Polaroid had instant photography; Ford had public transportation for the masses, and Apple had computing power for the masses. Though radically different in content and kind, all these organizations managed to bind people together around a common identity and sense of destiny.
When there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar vision statement), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. But many leaders have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanize the organization. All too often, a company's shared vision has revolved around the charisma of the leader, or around a crisis that galvanizes everyone temporarily. But given a choice, most people opt for pursuing a lofty goal, not only in times of crisis, but at all times. What has been lacking is a discipline for translating individual vision into shared vision, not a cookbook but a set of principles and guiding practices.

The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counter-productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt.

Team Learning: The discipline of team learning starts with dialogue, the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine thinking together. To the Greeks dia-logos meant a free flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to attain insights not attainable individually. Interestingly, the practice of dialogue has been preserved in many "primitive" cultures, such as that of the American Indian, but it has been almost completely lost to modern society. Today the principles and practices of dialogue are being rediscovered and put into contemporary context. Dialogue differs from the more common discussion, which has its roots with percussion and concussion, which literally mean a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition.

The discipline of dialogue also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interactions in teams that undermine learning. The patterns of defensiveness are often deeply ingrained in how a team operates. If unrecognized, they undermine learning. If recognized and surfaced creatively, they can actually accelerate learning.

Team playing is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where the rubber meets the road; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn.

Given those definitions then, is our school, Morgan Park Academy, a learning organization?

My first response to that question is that becoming a learning organization is a journey, not a goal. Becoming a learning organization is akin to pursuing personal growth, to continually create ourselves anew. There are no limits. Next I would suggest looking at some characteristics of learning organizations to judge how congruent our practices are with theirs.
Here is a brief list from The Fifth Discipline. Learning organizations are places that...

- Continually clarify what is important to them.
- Are committed to the truth, marked by a willingness to root out the ways they limit or deceive themselves.
- View a mistake as an event, the full benefit of which has not yet been turned into an advantage.
- Reflect openness, not gamesplaying, not personal agenda.
- Make decisions based on the best interests of the organization rather than on the best interests of individuals.
- Learn in a way that is generative, not adaptive.
- Have leaders who enroll, rather than leaders who sell.
- Have replaced compliance with commitment.
- Foster the migration of personal visions to shared visions.
- Strive to replace discussion with dialogue.
- Suspend assumptions.
- Cultivate a spirit of inquiry.

How far along the continuum are we? Each one of us has to answer that question individually, fully realizing our natural proclivity for self-deception. I honestly think we have begun the journey, but I also honestly think that we are not nearly as far along as we should be or think we are. It is imperative that we reflect on this concept of the learning organization because traditionally schools have operated, not as learning organizations, but rather as teaching organizations. The problem with teaching organizations is that they are top-down structures, and such a structure is more conducive to passing information along than it is for creating new solutions.

Schools need to undergo a metanoia. To grasp the meaning of metanoia is to grasp the deeper meaning of learning, for learning also involves a fundamental shift or movement of the mind. Traditionally, schools have defined learning as the taking in of information. While it is important to take in information, to do so seminally is to focus on the past. As Emerson reminds us, the eyes of man are set in the forehead, not in his hindhead. Man hopes. Genius creates. As the next century looms ever closer, society continually asks educators, "How are we going to train our young people for the rigors of the 21st century?" I would answer, we should train them to be creators.