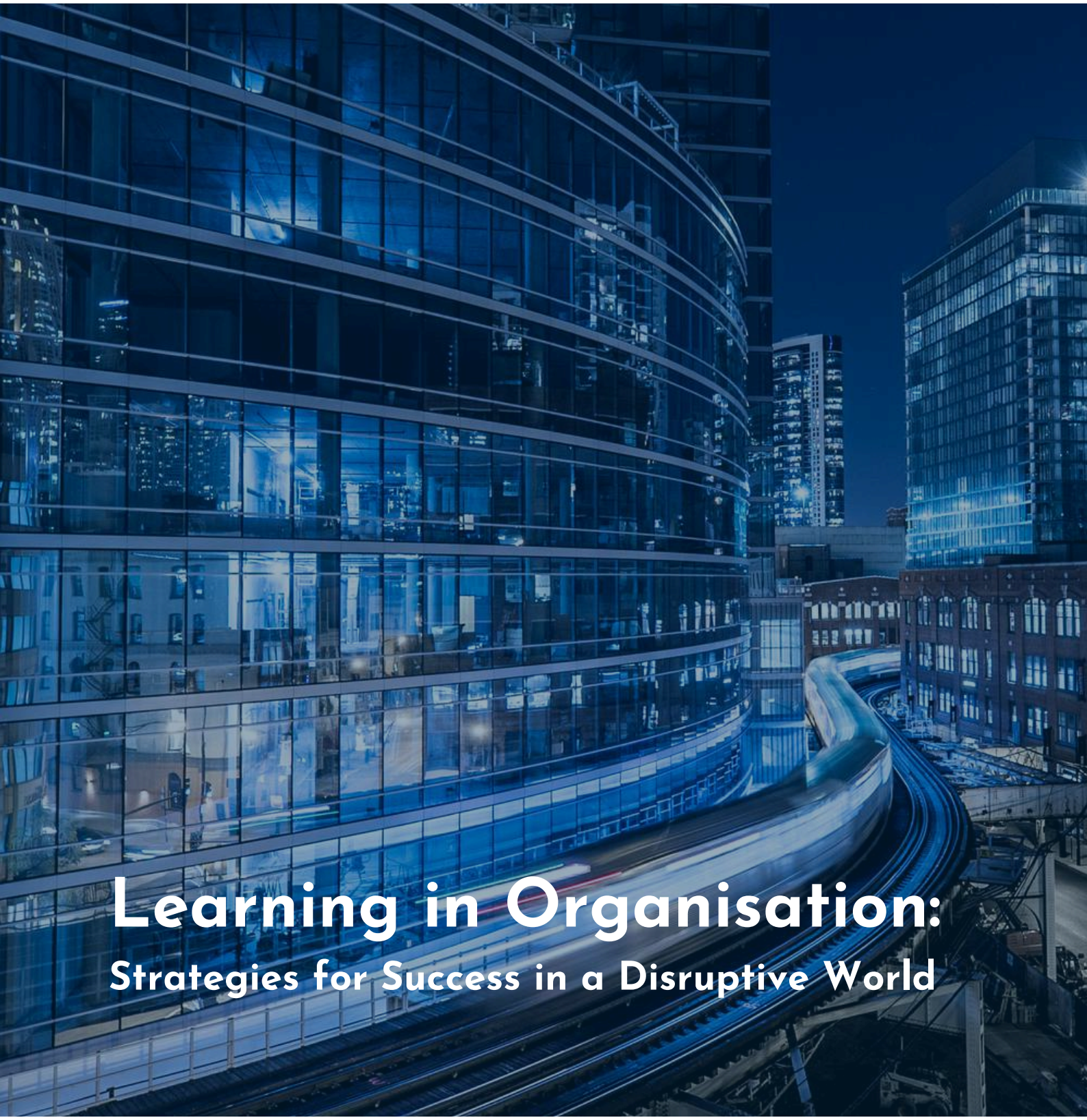
WHITEPAPER



Learning in Organisation:

Strategies for Success in a Disruptive World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's rapidly changing and disruptive business environment, organisations must be willing and able to advance their learning capabilities to remain competitive and successful. This imperative has formed the foundation of this whitepaper, Learning in Organisation: Strategies for Success in a Disruptive World.

This paper explores the concept of organisational learning and provides actionable guidance for business leaders, managers, and people professionals to transform their companies into learning organisations.

Key Points

1. Organisations must transform into learning organisations to succeed in this disruptive world.

2. Organisational learning is a crucial activity in every learning organisation. Strategies for cultivating organisational learning include:
   - Learning at work
   - Postmortem evaluation
   - Community of practice
   - Action learning

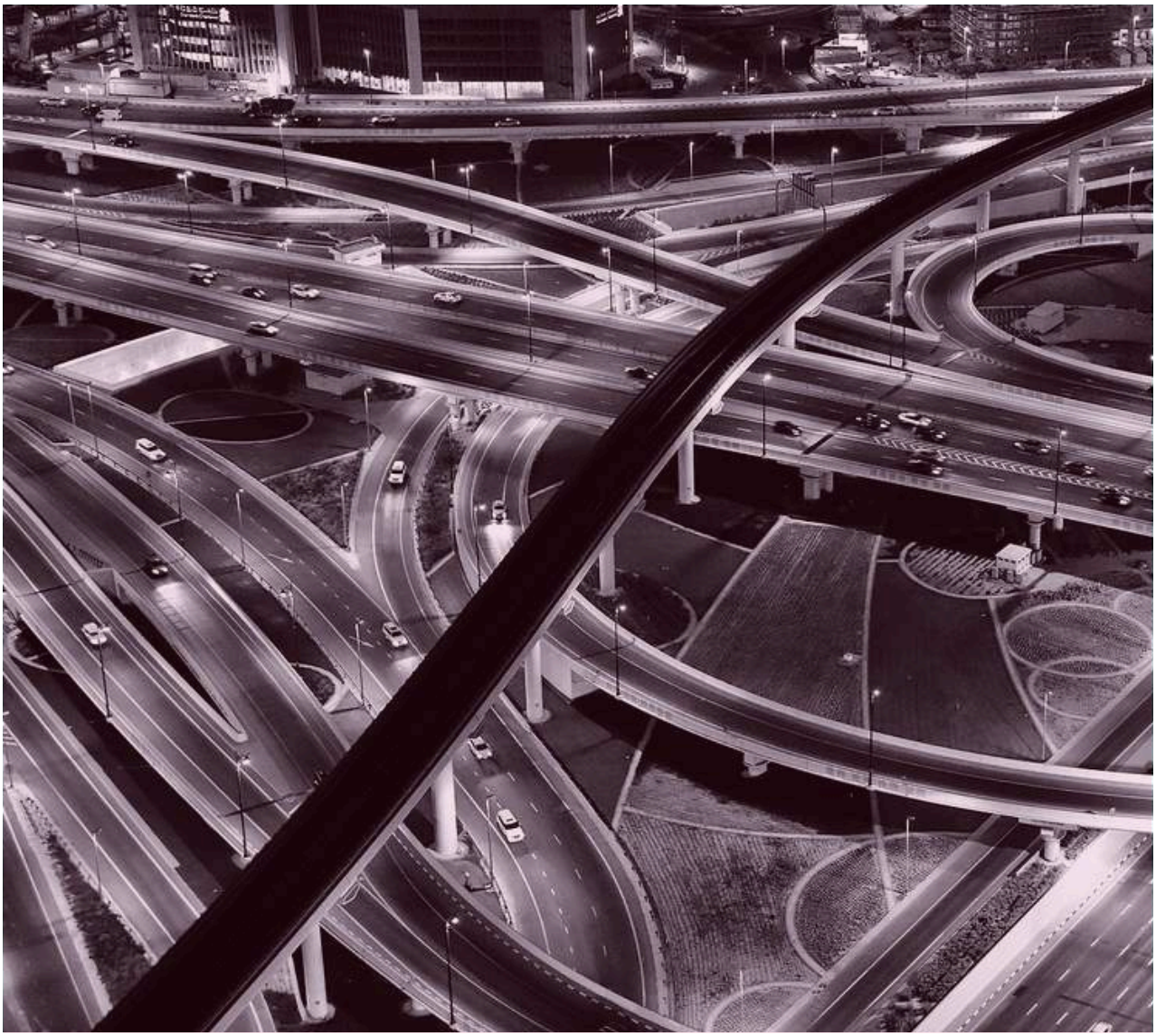
3. Organisations must understand the essential conditions required for creating and sustaining learning organisations, such as:
   - Leadership
   - Organisational culture
   - Organisational structure

4. Implementing the strategies discussed in this paper may enable organisations to enhance their learning capacity and sustain their competitive advantages to succeed in today’s disruptive business landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations around the world have entered an era of profound change and disruption. Apart from adapting to fundamental shifts driven by the global pandemic, climate crisis and changes in consumer demographics and behaviours, organisations must also navigate major disruptions caused by rapid technological advancement and fallouts from the current geopolitical conflicts.

To sustain their competitive advantages and succeed in such a disruptive world, organisations must ensure their rate of learning is equal to or greater than the rate of change in the environment. As accentuated by Professor Michael Marquardt from George Washington University: “The survival of the fittest is quickly becoming the survival of the fittest to learn” [1, p.1].



Accordingly, it has become imperative for organisations to transform into learning organisations if they wish to achieve success and attract talented individuals to be part of it. A learning organisation can be defined as “one that facilitates the learning of all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context” [2, p. 3]. Indeed, a recent policy paper published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [3] has likewise urged policymakers to encourage organisations to evolve into learning organisations as they are known to be the most productive ones.

To become a learning organisation, organisations must develop the ability to foster organisational learning, which is the central activity in every learning organisation. Put another way, learning organisation and organisational learning are two sides of the same coin; the former is the end while the latter is the means to the end.

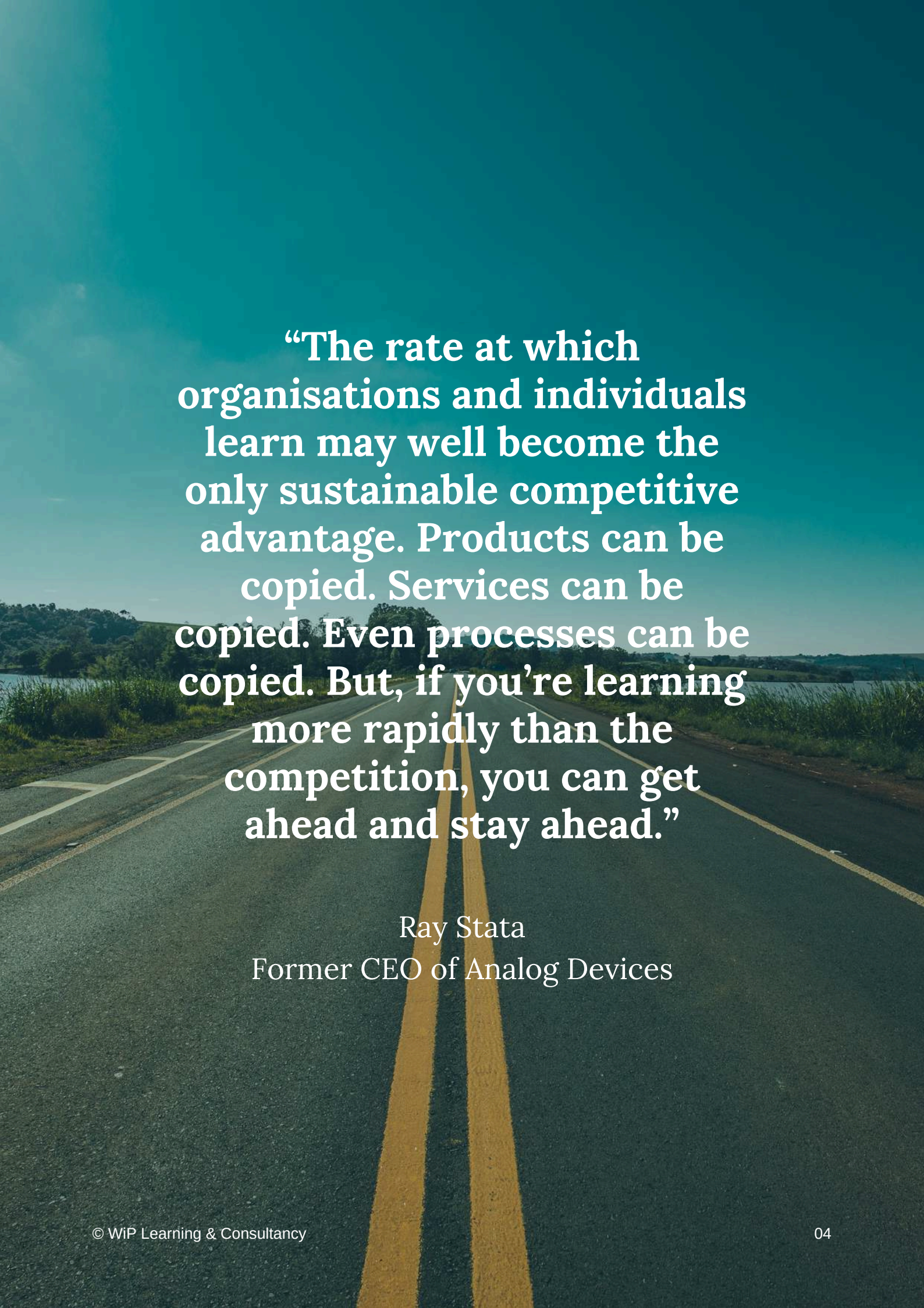
The survival of the fittest is quickly becoming the survival of the fittest to learn.

Professor Michael Marquardt

Yet, to cope with the present level of change and disruption, organisational learning must be represented in a new form such that it must connect learning with work performance and business objectives, focus on the importance of learning how to learn, offer opportunities for learning across the organisation and make learning everyone’s responsibility [1].

With that in mind, this whitepaper aims to integrate relevant theories and research to guide business leaders, managers and people professionals (e.g., practitioners in human resources, learning and development, organisational design and development, etc.) on how to drive organisational learning that embodies these critical attributes and transform their organisations into learning organisations for success.

This paper will first discuss various approaches to organisational learning before progressing to delineate conditions essential for developing learning organisations.



“The rate at which organisations and individuals learn may well become the only sustainable competitive advantage. Products can be copied. Services can be copied. Even processes can be copied. But, if you’re learning more rapidly than the competition, you can get ahead and stay ahead.”

Ray Stata
Former CEO of Analog Devices

LEARNING APPROACHES IN ORGANISATION

A) Learning at Work

Learning at work, or workplace learning, is deeply rooted in human history. Across ancient cultures, many trades were normally passed down through apprenticeship, which involved individuals learning the crafts by working closely with the master to develop their knowledge and experience over numerous years. Similarly, knowledge of farming and animal husbandry in agrarian societies was traditionally passed down within families, where children acquired the knowledge and skills by working alongside their parents from a young age.

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, formal workplace learning began to take shape in factories with workers learning new skills on the job, often with guidance from more experienced coworkers. These days, workplace learning has become a strategic function for driving learning within organisations. As employees engage in everyday work activities and interact with others at the workplace, they gain expertise for performing their role and secure new knowledge in response to problems and changes in the workplace, such as new technologies and practices.

Advancing these learning experiences at work would constitute a key aspect of a true learning organisation, which is central to developing the employees as well as sustaining the competitiveness of the organisation.

However, to ensure the effectiveness and realise the full potential of workplace learning, organisations must organise the activities and interactions to form a curriculum for workplace learning; just as how educational institutions organise their learning experiences.

Through his research, Professor Stephen Billett [4] at Griffith University has identified **four (4) key elements** in the structuring of a workplace learning curriculum:

1 Movement From Participation in Low- to High-Accountability Work Activities

First, there is a need to identify a pathway of activities for employees to undertake, beginning with activities of less accountability and complexity before progressing to those of greater accountability and complexity.

The structuring of these learning experiences is intended to lead novice employees to become experts in the workplace and for experienced employees to move into new types of work.

Nevertheless, unless necessitated by work practices, the sequence of activities need not always be undertaken in a fixed manner. Instead, several activities can be grouped and undertaken by the employees involved if such opportunities emerge at the workplace, and when they are ready to learn.

2 Access To Goals for Performance

Second, the workplace learning experiences must offer opportunities for employees to understand the work performance requirements, including the goals, importance and procedures for undertaking the work activities. Without these, the employees may not spend the effort to learn and perform the work to the required level, and it will be difficult to assess their progress and performance.

To this end, workplace learning designers may gather information from recent learners and the experts at work and share it with other employees for validation and adaptation.

3 Direct Guidance from More Experienced Others

The quality of the workplace learning experiences and outcomes is highly dependent on direct guidance offered by other more experienced coworkers.

Offering direct guidance can enable employees to access various work activities based on their learning readiness and the level of learning required by the work activities. Furthermore, it can allow employees to develop knowledge that may otherwise be hidden or difficult to learn alone while preventing them from acquiring incorrect knowledge and practices, such as unsafe work habits.

Some of these guidance strategies offered by other expert coworkers may include demonstration, mentoring, coaching, scaffolding and questioning.

4 Indirect Guidance Provided by the Physical and Social Environment

Finally, employees may gain indirect guidance from the workplace as they engage in their daily work, providing the clues, cues and models to support their learning.

Indirect guidance can be fostered through affording opportunities for employees to observe and imitate the work performance of other coworkers, discuss work practices with others over meals and view different learning artefacts at the workplace (e.g., completed works, standard operating procedure manuals, equipment and tools, etc.).

Incorporating Work-based Experiences with Educational Interventions

Despite the vast amount of learning experiences that can be afforded by the workplace, some knowledge and skills can only be developed with the assistance of outside experts.

Apart from assigning employees to participate in external training programmes offered by educational institutions, organisations may partner with external experts, such as training providers, equipment suppliers or industry professionals to deliver workplace-specific training programmes that are tailored to meet the workplace or work requirements.

Still, for this type of learning to be effective, the external experts must understand the organisation's needs, facilitate learning experiences linked to the workplace and offer follow-up interventions (e.g., post-training coaching) to support employees on the new learning [5].

These days, workplace learning has become a strategic function for driving learning within organisations.

In sum, organising and implementing workplace learning experiences is an important step to making individual knowledge organisational. In other words, the knowledge individuals possess is kept outside the individuals in the form of organisational memory (e.g., procedures, systems, routines and manuals) that can be constantly updated and serve as a basis for performing work tasks and fostering further learning.

B) Postmortem Evaluation

Postmortem evaluation is an important learning approach for knowledge creation in organisations. Inviting relevant stakeholders to review past events or projects can create opportunities for them to critically reflect on and share their experiences, discuss the lessons learned and identify ways for future improvement.

However, to foster knowledge retention and transfer, the generated knowledge and insights must be captured in written reports and made accessible to others within the organisation.

Postmortem evaluations can be systematically performed through these steps [6]:

01

Invite Relevant Stakeholders

The postmortem evaluation sessions should be open for participation from the entire project team and other stakeholders who can contribute to the discussion.

02

Appoint a Facilitator

A facilitator should be appointed to steer the discussion, organise the analysis and document the insights drawn from the evaluation. The facilitator can be someone within or outside the organisation. An advantage of having external facilitators is that they are often regarded as more objective and neutral.

03

Review History

At this stage, the stakeholders involved will review the event or project history to understand what has happened. This step may include reviewing available documents like the project plans, schedules and reports.

04

Set Goals

Establishing explicit goals for the postmortem evaluation is key for guiding the process. The goals may include collecting all the experiences from the events or projects, identifying major achievements, determining improvement opportunities or developing recommendations for a specific aspect.

05

Collect Data

This step involves gathering the participants' experiences of the event or project. These experiences should not be restricted to the negative aspects but may also comprise the positive features.

Data can be collected through facilitated group discussions, semi-structured interviews or the KJ method (named after its inventor, Jiro Kawakita). The latter would require the participants to write up to four positive and negative experiences on post-it notes, paste the notes on a whiteboard and rearrange the notes into groups based on topics.

06

Prioritise Important Topics for Analysis

Once the important topics have been identified, the group must prioritise them before proceeding with the analysis. This ensures that the most important issues will be addressed first.

07

Identify Root Causes

Once sufficient and reliable data have been collected, the group will progress to identify the root causes of the positive and negative experiences. This can be achieved using Ishikawa (or fishbone) diagrams to analyse the identified experiences.

08

Documentation

At the end of the analysis, the facilitator will codify the findings and insights into a written report. The report may include descriptions of the event or project, problems and successes, main causes, and improvement activities. The discussion or interview transcripts may also be included as an appendix to inform readers how the problems and successes were discussed.

09

Follow-Up Actions

As a final step, the facilitator will submit the report to the relevant stakeholders and departments (e.g., quality control) for review and implementation of the necessary measures.

After Action Review

Perhaps one of the most popular examples of postmortem evaluation is what the U.S. Army has referred to as After Action Review (AAR) [7]. The AAR is a systematic debriefing process that will be conducted after every project, mission or critical event, and will be largely guided by asking four questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What do we do next time? (i.e., what activities to sustain or improve?)

The insights drawn from the AAR will then be documented by the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and disseminated vertically across the chain of command and laterally through authorised websites; thereby, forming the organisational memory.

Summing up, postmortem evaluations, when used appropriately, can derive rich learning from past events or projects, discover improvement opportunities and bring about sustained change, which can benefit other teams as well as the entire organisation.

C) Community of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) can be described as a group of "people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis" [8, p. 4]. This term was first coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their 1991 seminal book Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.

CoPs can bring several benefits to organisations, including making it easier to reuse existing knowledge assets, enabling quicker responses to address customer needs, flattening the learning curve for new hires and driving innovations [9].

However, not every community would constitute a CoP as it is characterised by **three crucial elements** [10]:

1

The Domain

CoP encompasses an identity specified by a shared domain of interest. Membership will entail a commitment to the domain that forms the shared competence, differentiating the members from others.

2

The Community

Through their interactions in the community, members can form relationships that allow them to learn from one another.

3

The Practice

As CoP members are practitioners, the continual interactions can enable them to develop a shared range of resources (e.g. tools, stories, experiences and problem-solving methods) for their practice.

While CoPs have been traditionally viewed as a self-emerging and self-organising phenomenon focused on individual learning, the relentless pressure for innovation is driving some organisations to nurture strategic CoPs to create value and achieve strategic advantage [11].

For instance, a study has shown that global videogame developer, Ubisoft has successfully driven creativity and innovation by affording the space and freedom for their CoPs' members to experiment with new ideas while monitoring their developed knowledge to ensure alignment with the organisation's goals and strategies [12].

Organisations that wish to cultivate and sustain CoPs successfully must consider the following **five (5) elements**:

01 Community Members

The quality of a community is highly dependent on the characteristics of its members, such as their level of motivation, willingness to share their knowledge and their creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, organisations should include in the community those who are competent and understand the business goals to champion the cause.

02 Community Facilitators

Studies have suggested that CoP facilitators are central to fostering productive discussions [13] and cultivating communities [14]. Accordingly, it is recommended that organisations should appoint an external provider or someone from within the community to facilitate the activities though this role may be rotated among the members.

03 Community Activities

A CoP can offer opportunities for its members to learn from one another and develop their practice through different activities. These activities may include, joint problem-solving, requesting information, seeking the experience of others, sharing knowledge assets that can be applied in different contexts, coordination and synergy, visiting other worksites, and mapping knowledge for identifying gaps [10].

04 Rhythm

The rhythm of a CoP is a powerful sign of its sustainability [15]. To create an appropriate rhythm, the activities may comprise a mix of routine formal meetings for building relationships and other exciting events to create novelty and a sense of shared adventure.

However, there is no one right rhythm that can suit all communities – a strong rhythm may create a sense of liveliness, a fast rhythm may be overwhelming for some, and a slow rhythm may make others feel lethargic – and the tempo is expected to shift as the community develops. Hence, the key is to find a rhythm that suits the community.

05 Place

According to urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg [16], a 'third place' is a place beyond the 'first place' (i.e., home) and the 'second place' (i.e., workplace) that can foster social interactions in a community and help people build trust and relations that constitute social capital. Third places may include but are not limited to businesses serving food and beverages.

Since learning within communities is a sociocultural process, organisations should optimise third places for the CoP activities. For instance, instead of holding a CoP discussion at the workplace, it can be held at a café, thereby, contributing to the rhythm of the community.

By considering these five elements, organisations will be able to cultivate and support CoPs to drive continuous learning and harness their potential for strategic advantage.

D) Action Learning

Action learning is a process in which small numbers of individuals work on real and important organisational problems and collectively learn how to solve these problems in better ways. Through this approach, members can discover how to work well as a group and understand how the learnings can benefit everyone in the group and the organisation.

For instance, action learning has been instrumental in transforming General Electric (GE) into a learning organisation. As James Noel, former manager of executive education at GE, noted, "Action learning has made participants active partners in the learning process. Because the team projects provide value to GE's businesses, it has an immediate return on investment." [1, p. 209].

Nonetheless, to realise the full benefits of action learning and ensure its success, organisations must fully utilise and support these **six (6) elements** [1]:

01 | Problem

Action learning is focused on deriving solutions to a specific problem, issue, challenge, project or task that is important to an individual, a team or the organisation.

Problem selection is significant because it should offer opportunities for the action learning group to act, reflect and learn. Hence, the chosen problem must be real, meaningful and valuable to focus on.

Some of these problems may include:

- Reducing staff turnover in the organisation
- Reorganising a department or business unit
- Enhancing information systems
- Streamlining work procedures
- Improving sales and revenue

02 | Group or Team

Depending on the nature of the identified problem, the action learning group should comprise between four and eight individuals from various departments within the organisation or involve others outside the organisation, such as the suppliers or customers.

Studies have shown that groups with less than four members may lack diversity, creativity and differing perspectives and groups with more than eight members may be too complicated and do not offer sufficient airtime for everyone.

More importantly, the group should consist of people with the autonomy to implement the recommended actions, who are concerned about the problem and possess knowledge about it; in other words, those ‘who can, care and know’.

03 | Reflective Questioning

Action learning is guided by the process of asking questions to understand the nature of the problem, reflecting on it, establishing viable solutions and taking action.

Asking insightful questions can help members challenge their underlying assumptions, foster rich learning, develop their listening skills to build trust and relationships with one another, improve their creativity and develop new shared mental models. Consequently, these benefits will result in more effective reflection and actions.

04 | Action

Action learning is underpinned by the belief that real learning only occurs with action. Through implementing the recommended solutions and strategies, the action learning group can determine if they have overlooked certain issues, what problems may follow, what they need to do differently in future and how to implement the solutions across the organisation.

In essence, the word ‘action’ in action learning is focused on taking action, rather than just coming up with solutions and recommendations. It is, therefore, key to involve members who have the authority to implement the recommended actions, which otherwise, can affect their level of commitment, drive and innovation.

05 | Individual, Group and Organisational Learning

Solving the identified organisational problems can lead to immediate benefits to the organisation. Yet, the longer-term benefits can only be derived from the learning gained by individual group members and the utilisation of the new collective knowledge across the organisation.

06 | Coaching / Facilitation

Assigning an action learning coach is crucial to support the members in reflecting on their learning and how they are solving the problems. The coach may likewise aid the members to focus on what they are planning to achieve, what challenges they are facing, what processes they are implementing, and the implications involved.

This role can be rotated among the group or be assigned to a specific person throughout the existence of the group.

> **Action learning has made participants active partners in the learning process. Because the team projects provide value to GE's businesses, it has an immediate return on investment.**
>
> James Noel
> Former Manager, Executive Education
> General Electric

In sum, to harness the full potential and ensure the success of action learning, organisations will require all these six elements, which are intertwined and will help to reinforce each other.

CONDITIONS TO FOSTER LEARNING IN ORGANISATION

A) LEADERSHIP

Leadership plays a critical role in nurturing learning organisations. To advance organisational learning, a leader must be able to practice both transformational and transactional leadership, albeit under different situations [17].

Transformational leadership refers to “leader behaviours that transform and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organisation” [18, p. 423]. In contrast, transactional leadership is “largely based on the exchange of rewards contingent on performance” [18. p. 427].

Transformational Leadership

During turbulent times that require organisations to alter their existing institutionalised learning (e.g., culture, procedures, structures, systems and strategies) to deal with changing conditions, transformational leadership promotes individual and group learning by encouraging organisation members to question the underlying assumptions, come up with creative ideas and take calculated risks.

Such a democratic and open approach can effectively drive innovation and double-loop learning.

Transformational leaders often tend to be effective communicators who can mobilise followers to commit to the new organisational vision and purpose and inspire them to overcome their resistance to adopting new routines. As a result, this form of leadership is likewise necessary for acquiring buy-in when newly institutionalised learning is established and constitutes the organisational memory.

However, once the organisation has transited from a state of change to a state of stability, leaders should switch from transformational to more transactional to focus on standardisation, control, formalisation and efficiency.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership cultivates individual and group learning by encouraging more communications and collaborations across the organisation to increase efficiency in current practices. They also offer systems and programmes for organisation members to disseminate, utilise, and refine institutionalised learning for future decisions and practices. This helps to ensure established routines will not be neglected or ignored, which is crucial to safeguard the organisation's continuity.

Through their consistency in effectuating transactional agreements, transactional leaders can foster a high level of trust, reliability and respect. These are factors associated with transformational leadership.

In sum, through the lens of complexity leadership theory, effective leaders must possess an enhanced level of awareness and instinct that would enable them to dance between chaos and stasis.

In addition, effective leaders must be willing to accept paradoxes in organisations; that is, have the authority but not seek to control; stay in the 'know' but be willing to guide others into the unknown; appreciate the need for structure but not be too structured; and be open to exploring possible future circumstances and yet not commit to one permanent state [19].

B) ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Organisational culture can be simply described as “the way we do things around here” [20, p. 501]. Multiple studies have proven that organisational culture is an important factor that influences the development of a learning organisation; yet, it has long been suggested that an organisation’s culture is largely shaped by its leadership [21].

Bureaucratic Culture

Transactional leadership fosters bureaucratic cultures that are power-oriented and hierarchical, with clear delineations of authority and responsibility and a high degree of systematisation.

This type of culture with its well-developed employees and efficient systems and procedures is suited for organisations in stable business environments. However, a ‘pure’ bureaucratic culture may severely curtail innovation and risk-taking and is unlikely to attract and retain ambitious and creative people [22].

Innovative and Supportive Culture

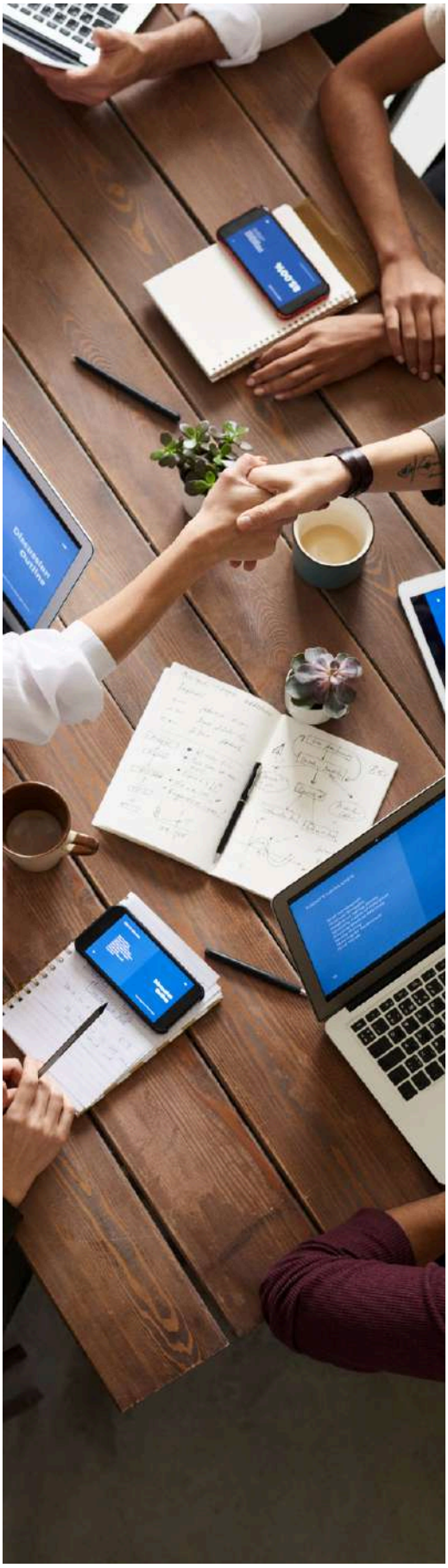
Transformational leadership, on the other hand, fosters innovative and supportive organisational cultures. Innovative cultures are dynamic and exciting and involve creativity and risk-taking, whereas supportive cultures are relationship-oriented, trusting and open, where people are helpful to one another.

Innovative and supportive cultures can improve employees' commitment to the organisation [23] and foster supportive learning environments that encourage people to explore new ways of working without fear of punishment; the latter is considered a critical building block for creating learning organisations [7].

However, in reality, an organisation's culture rarely fits neatly into one of these three forms. Instead, it is often a combination of all three categories but at varying degrees.

Hence, the key to fostering a learning organisation is to cultivate more innovative and supportive cultural attributes while also preserving an appropriate level of bureaucratic qualities, such as implementing a reward system to incentivise and benefit innovators for their efforts [1].

C) ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE



An organisation's structure is defined as "the framework in which the organisation defines how tasks are divided, resources are deployed and departments are coordinated" [24, p. 392].

Interestingly, organisational structure and culture can be considered as two sides of the same coin as they are interrelated and frequently interact with one another. An organisation's culture is constructed within and circumscribed by its structure which, in turn, can influence the level of interaction and learning in the organisation.

There are generally two main forms of organisational structure – ***organic and mechanistic structure***.

Organic Structure

An organic structure possesses a broad and fluid job scope and a network structure of control, which is conducive to lateral communication.

In organisations with an organic structure, members are usually more mutually dependent on one another and more willing to share ideas and experiences with and learn from one another to attain the organisation's goals and vision.

This type of organisation structure is, thus, suited for turbulent, fast-changing and complex business environments [25].

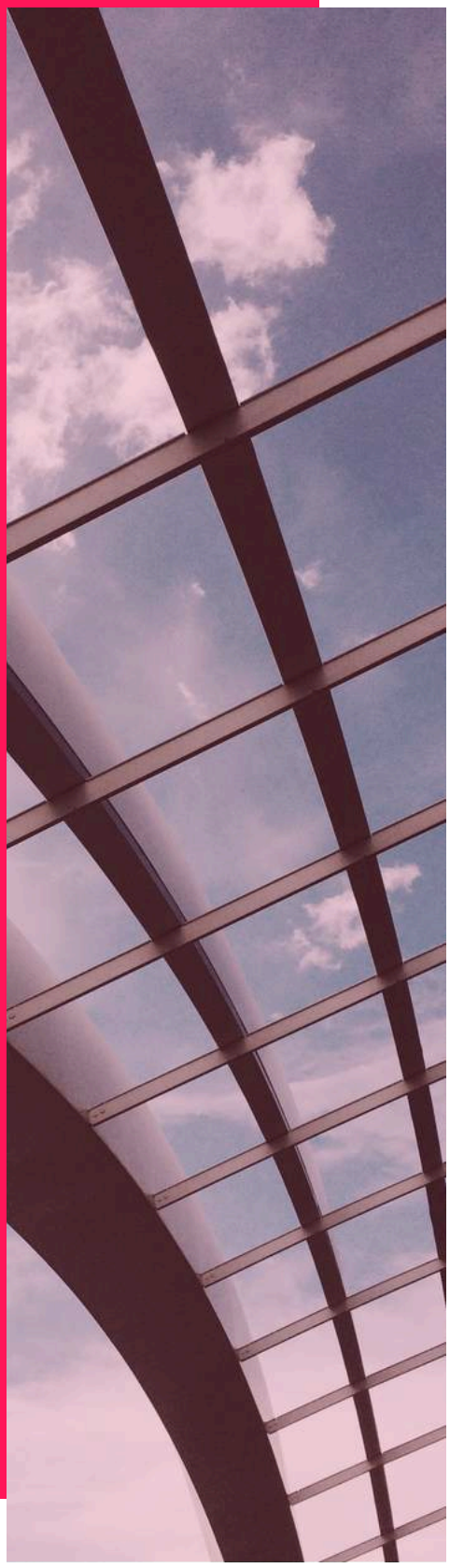
Mechanistic Structure

On the other hand, a mechanistic structure is characterised by highly specialised job arrangements and well-specified work roles. It also has a hierarchical structure of authority where decisions are primarily made by the top management. This type of structure is important for achieving operational efficiency and is suited for organisations functioning in stable environments.

However, having a highly departmentalised structure with employees separated into impermeable and permanent departments/groups can create a balkanised culture, where employees prefer working with those within their group, rather than with others across the organisation.

Consequently, learning will occur predominantly within the group as there will be limited opportunities for employees to learn from others beyond their group [26]. Such divisional barriers will not only restrict the flow of knowledge and learning across the organisation but may also support the growth of prejudice, mistrust and bias among isolated employees [1]. In this sense, a highly mechanistic organisation structure can create a situation where the whole of the organisation is less than the sum of its parts.

Nevertheless, large organisations should not adopt a specific structure – either organic or mechanistic – as that will not engender more organisational learning. Instead, they should adopt a structure that is more organic and less mechanistic to enhance organisational learning. This can be achieved through fostering low horizontal job specialisation, low centralisation (i.e., decentralisation), high autonomy, and high socialisation [27].



First, to achieve low horizontal job specialisation, a large organisation may, for example, combine several group tasks within a department. This can increase the variety of tasks for each employee and enable them to participate in various departmental processes to gain different perspectives and improve their knowledge and expertise. When applied across departments, this approach can help to reduce the overall level of balkanisation within a large organisation.

Second, to accomplish low centralisation, large organisations may delegate their formal power down the hierarchy and encourage employees from different levels to participate in decision-making whenever needed.

Next, to attain high autonomy, large organisations may afford their employees adequate freedom to develop solutions for problem-solving, thereby creating a supportive learning environment that encourages new ideas.

Lastly, large organisations may establish practices for newcomers to learn the culture, values, norms and desired behaviours. This can mediate high socialisation as they adopt the same culture and develop friendship and mutual trust, which are important for effective knowledge transfer within the organisation.

CONCLUSION

The ability to foster learning in organisations has become a critical organisational success factor in this era of unprecedented change and disruption. This whitepaper has explored different approaches and conditions vital for organisations to advance organisational learning and transform into learning organisations.

By implementing effective workplace learning, leveraging postmortem evaluations, nurturing communities of practice, and utilising action learning, organisations can drive continuous learning and improvement in their businesses. These approaches, when combined with the right leadership, organisational culture, and structure, can significantly enhance an organisation's capacity to learn and sustain its competitive advantages to achieve success in this disruptive business landscape.

However, it is also important to recognise that becoming a learning organisation is an ongoing journey that requires commitment from leaders and managers, a willingness to challenge existing assumptions and practices, and active participation from everyone in the organisation.

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