

Becoming Learning Organizations: A Progress Report

Prepared by the BASSC Human Resources Committee for
the Bay Area Social Services Consortium

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I: Background

In January 1999 the Bay Area Social Services Consortium was presented with a discussion paper authored by members of the BASSC Human Resources Committee advocating the transformation of county agencies into learning organizations. As discussed in the paper, *Management and Human Resources as Partners in Creating a Learning Organization*, a learning organization is characterized by:

- Fostering and creating ways to learn throughout the organization
- Empowering people to learn whatever they need to know to improve productivity
- Collecting, storing and transferring knowledge effectively and productively
- Effectively utilizing technology to support the above activities

A series of recommendations were developed for the various levels of staff within the organization (see Figure 1). Additionally, action steps identified for the directors were:

1. Review the paper and decide if becoming a learning organization would best serve the agencies' clients, stakeholders, and staff;
2. Identify key county staff who would be involved in creating a learning organization;
3. Share information and expertise and report on the progress being made in each county in becoming learning organizations.

The Committee was charged with meeting and supporting one another and our respective counties in following through with the recommendations outlined in the paper. This paper serves as a progress report and an opportunity to reconfirm each county's commitment to the process of developing learning organizations. Findings of the Committee followed by recommendations and action steps are presented for consideration.

II: Findings

Each Committee member surveyed their own county to assess the progress made in becoming a learning organization. Among member counties, there exists a diversity of approaches to the recommendations outlined in the original discussion paper. In examining progress made by counties over the last year, the Committee found:

1. Progress has been made in transforming agencies to learning organizations.

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Some strategies that counties have implemented, are being developed or are being considered include¹:

- Establishing formal mentoring programs for employees at all levels. (San Mateo, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Alameda,).
 - Implementing organizational development and strategic planning activities (Contra Costa, Monterey, San Mateo, San Francisco, Sonoma, Alameda, Santa Cruz).
 - Conducting learning needs assessments at all levels (all counties).
 - Targeting training to supervisors and managers regarding their role in the learning process (Alameda, Monterey, San Mateo, Contra Costa, Sonoma, Santa Cruz, San Francisco).
 - Utilizing annual reviews to promote individual learning and development (Santa Cruz).
 - Collaborating with junior colleges and universities to design and provide higher education for employees (San Mateo, Monterey, Sonoma, Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Cruz, San Francisco).
 - Creating positions or structures to support the transition to a learning organization (Monterey, San Mateo, Santa Cruz).
 - Creating forums to examine the way agencies do business and supporting intra-agency learning (San Francisco, Contra Costa, Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Mateo).
 - Inclusion of line staff in planning for business improvements (San Francisco, San Mateo, Contra Costa, Monterey, Santa Cruz).
2. Strategic placement of human resource leaders within the organizational structure varies from agency to agency.²

The Committee believes that the reporting relationship of staff development and personnel within the organizational structure is an important indicator of the value placed on moving to a learning organization and is essential to planning, decision-making and implementation.

While the placement of these leaders varies from agency to agency, few of them sit at the table with the senior management group.

3. The components of the learning organization may not be captured in departmental mission or value statements.

Committee members felt that referencing learning and the development of staff should be key values for our agencies.

¹ Counties listed in parentheses are illustrative and may not be inclusive of progress made by all BASSC member counties.

² Human resource leaders include managers responsible for staff development, organizational development and personnel.

4. Organizational development has emerged as a crucial aspect of the learning organization.

The Committee noted that three counties have invested significant resources to organizational development in the form of creating specific staff positions. Other counties have integrated organizational development work in the job responsibilities of staff development officers. It is increasingly clear that learning organizational principles and practices are linked to organizational development activities. See Figure 2 for one county's view of integrating organizational development into the agency.

III. Learning from the Process

The BASSC Human Resources Committee has met regularly over the last year, supporting one another in implementing learning organization principles by sharing ideas and resources and creating a learning environment among ourselves. Collectively, we have learned a great deal from the process that each county has implemented to transition to a learning organization and in sharing the progress that has been made. Committee members recognize that differences exist between counties in organizational structure and organizational readiness for becoming learning organizations. However, the Committee identified several common themes among member counties that are important to consider as counties move forward:

1. Organizational readiness is a critical component in the transition to a learning organization. An agency assessment should be performed to identify where the organization is currently and what resources are needed to move forward; the prioritization of resources including time and staff is a key component as becoming a learning organization occurs simultaneously to accomplishing the work of the agency; finally, the creation of a realistic plan to transform the agency into a learning organization with clearly defined milestones and benchmarks will move the process forward.
2. The need for directors to demonstrate support of learning organization principles is crucial to a successful process; however, having a supportive director is not sufficient to ensure that the process moves forward. Commitment to becoming a learning organization must be understood and shared at the senior management level and be adequately communicated with all levels of staff.
3. The modeling of behavior, long-term commitment and integration into planning at the highest levels of management is particularly important to the success of learning organization implementation. Ownership of becoming a learning organization, not just buy-in of the concept, is crucial to this success.
4. Learning organization principles need to be reflected in the mission and vision of the agency in an explicit way. Consistent implementation, regular

communication regarding principles and a commitment to a shared process makes learning organization principles real.

5. Each component of an organization needs to develop and implement learning goals specific to its domain. Differences in goals and objectives are understandable given the diverse roles within organizations. An opportunity to tailor learning goals to the roles and responsibilities of a specific division or department makes the learning organization principles meaningful. It gives all staff and managers the opportunity to buy in to a process related to what they do on a day to day basis.
6. Human resources/personnel's central role with management and staff in hiring, retention, employee relations and classification makes it essential they commit to the transformation to a learning organization and assist in the implementation agency-wide.

IV. Recommendations

1. Encourage managers to move beyond simple agreement with learning organization principles to actual ownership and stewardship of the following:
 - Develop consensus at all levels of management that becoming a learning organization is in the best interests of the agency, its staff and clients.
 - Implement an agreed upon plan of the steps required in becoming a learning organization with milestones of accomplishment. Agree that completed milestones will be celebrated and rewarded.
 - Develop and support an agency culture that promotes shared responsibility for the evolution of a learning organization
 - Identify assessment and evaluation tools to be utilized in implementation
2. Review the composition of your executive team to assure that personnel, staff and organizational development are all included in the planning and implementation of learning organization principles as well as the important decisions required to move the plan forward.
3. Promote and model organizational development tools and expand the utilization of these new skills throughout the agency.
4. Continue the work of the BASSC Human Resources Committee through 2000 with the following action steps:
 - a. Prioritize critical/essential steps for any organization to take in transitioning to a learning organization.
 - b. Develop an assessment tool that will identify opportunities and roadblocks regarding each organization's readiness.

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- c. Develop a prototypical action plan with timelines for becoming a learning organization.
- d. Build upon the experiences of several counties that have developed successful partnerships with local community colleges to expand the county agencies' capacities as learning organizations.
- e. Sponsor a series of regional workshops that teach organizational development skills.
- f. Create a plan for establishing a regional learning archive.
- g. Obtain a continued commitment by Committee members to serve as a link to their county director and provide on-going status reports on progress.

IV. Conclusion

The conclusions and recommendations found within this first progress report serve to highlight county accomplishments in becoming learning organizations; focus on areas where counties may want to pay closer attention or expend additional resources in order to move forward; and provide this Committee with a full agenda of activities to further support our counties in this transition. It is hoped that each county will use this paper as a springboard to renew their commitment to becoming learning organizations and a tool to assess their own progress and readiness in moving forward.

The Committee looks forward to another year of working together. As members we continue to enjoy the opportunity provided by the Committee to look beyond the confines of our agency boundaries, share resources and ideas, and network with one another on a variety of issues and concerns. We look forward to continuing our work together, to encourage risk-taking and the development of new practices within our agencies.

Figure 1: Summary of Recommendations for Becoming A Learning Organization

<p><u>Direct Service Staff</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serve as mentors and experts within the organization and utilize the fruits benefits of their learning by representing the organization to the community. 2. Accept responsibility for becoming an active participant in the learning organization. 3. Take responsibility for the transfer of formal and informal learning to practical application. 4. Identify for supervisors and managers how the application of new learning impacts on effective delivery of service. This may include the need to reevaluate existing policies and/or procedures. 5. Take an active role in providing feedback to Staff Development and supervisors regarding the quality and effectiveness of training. 	<p><u>Supervisors</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Act as coaches and mentors with their staff, developing and supporting the learning and career development plans of each staff member. 2. Take action to improve and insure the transfer of learning from formalized training to the worksite and back to where it influences policies, procedures and training content. 3. Conduct regular unit meetings to effectively promote and reinforce unit and individual learning goals. 4. Utilize individual worker supervisory sessions to maximize learning opportunities. 5. Support the creative use of Staff Development as consultants. 6. Collaborate with staff development to creatively use existing training and development resources in an expanded array of situations. 7. Actively participate in training sessions and assist staff in reinforcing the transfer of learning from the training room. 	<p><u>Managers</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Move away from the "training as panacea" approach to crises and legislative changes. 2. Encourage the on-going professional development of all staff not only by supporting learning but by being the champion of succession planning, mentoring, coaching, continuing education, etc. 3. Work with staff development in the utilization of resources and staff expertise to creatively address organizational learning needs. 4. Support or accommodate workloads that allow for the time needed for all staff to meet their learning objectives and obligations. 5. Actively participate in training sessions and assist staff in reinforcing the transfer of learning from the training room.
<p><u>Staff Development</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assist management in proactively addressing learning needs of the organization. 2. Assist personnel in addressing succession planning, promotion, on-going education, recruitment, retention and other critical issues. 3. Assisting the organization in effectively handling change by being "on call" in the consultant role to units, managers and departments. 4. Work with supervisors and managers to improve the reinforcement and transfer of training and to promote learning throughout the organization. 5. Pursue and maintain the highest level of organization development efforts and evaluation of the processes. 	<p><u>Personnel</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assist managers in identifying the best candidates for prospering in a learning organization. 2. Share expertise on application screening and hiring practices. 3. Collaborate with staff development to update existing job specifications and monitor minimum qualification standards. 4. Assist the organization in the creation of professional growth opportunities. 5. Collaborate in agency reorganization projects, by providing statistical and historical information on staffing levels, staffing patterns, workload and workflow, staff turnover and retention. 	<p><u>Directors</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analyze organizational problems and challenges with a consultant's perspective: utilizing questions and discussions and demonstrating the learning focus. 2. Advocate for and explain the transition to becoming a learning organization to all stakeholders. 3. Assure that organizational structure and reporting lines support human resources in making the transition to a learning organization. 4. Promote an open decision-making and information-sharing structure to allow human resources increased access to management and critical information. 5. Expect accountability and participation from all staff in promoting and supporting learning principles. 6. Reward on-going learning through merit increases, promotional opportunities and the opportunity to utilize highly valued skills.

Figure 2 Excerpt from *Implementing the Learning Organization at the Monterey County Department of Social Services*

What will it look like with OD as an integral part of our organization?

1. All staff are responsible for contributing to creating a workplace environment that:
 - values treating others with respect and courtesy at all times
 - supports and embraces personal and team accountability
 - uses innovative and positive problem-solving methods
 - values integrity in all actions

2. All areas of work and performance of job duties demonstrates personal and team accountability principles.

Personal accountability: *The ability, willingness and courage to renew attitudes and behaviors to achieve desired outcomes.*

- openly hears and provides constructive feedback utilizing one's best professional judgment
- willingly seeks to identify one's own involvement or part in a situation and to use that information to learn and grow
- willingly assumes a neutral attitude before responding when work is critiqued or outcomes are different than expected
- seeks knowledge within one's self and from others of one's strengths and areas for improvement
- seeks to identify available choices and to recognize that making choices that are aligned with the department's principles are affirming and empowering
- willingly shares strengths and skills with others
- willingly acknowledges and corrects mistakes
- participates in creating an environment where mistakes are openly addressed and corrected without judgment or blame

Team accountability: *Each person acknowledges and supports the other team members, both when they are successful and when there are challenges.*

- accepts personal responsibility for contributing to the resolution of team challenges
- brings issues that affect the team to light, without judgment
- supports other team members while they make the changes that address problematic situations
- maintains a personal attitude that encourages healthy, open dialogue and energetic functioning of the team

Figure 2 (cont'd.)

3. Every employee assumes responsibility for ongoing learning
 - recognizes that performing the department's important work involves many skills and intricate processes and requires on-going commitment to learning
 - initiates training requests that are relevant to and enhance our work knowledge and skill
 - attends all training when registered. If unable to attend, provides timely notification to the registrar and reschedules well before the training date
 - utilizes one's relationship with one's supervisor as a process to improve professional and personal communication skills
 - develops mentoring relationships to enhance professional growth

4. Every employee uses and models constructive channels to bring about changes.
 - strives for open-mindedness and to understand all sides of challenges that surface
 - strives to understand the systems one works with and within to utilize appropriate means to effect changes within those systems
 - strives, first, for the resolution of differences at the lowest level possible through dialogue with others affected. Utilizes the chain of command to resolve issues that cannot be resolved at the lowest level