ECUMENICAL LEARNING: CONSIDERING ALL STAKEHOLDERS

Joan F. Marques

This article introduces ecumenical learning, a comprehensive and revolutionary style of organizational learning. The article presents the factors to be considered, from the moment a deviation surfaces or an insight for a change in the status quo appears to evaluation of the ramifications of the resulting new application for all stakeholders. It also reviews prerequisites that need to be in place for ecumenical learning to work and illustrates the process through an abstract figure.

WHEN ARGYRIS (1977) INTRODUCED the double loop learning concept in the 1970s, his theory earned him widespread respect for the revolutionary insights it presented at that time. Argyris questioned the hitherto dominating perception that learning was largely a single loop process that basically entailed executing set policies and procedures without questioning their foundations or validity in current, oftentimes changed, situations. Argyris compared single loop learning with a thermostat. The modus operandi of a thermostat is that it does not question the reasons why it was set on a certain degree but simply adjusts the system when the temperature rises above or falls below that point. In double loop learning, Argyris stated, something more is going on: the process of reciprocity is instated. To cite this great thinker: "Double loop learning is a method that includes the process of detecting and attempting to correct error and the process of questioning underlying organization policies and objectives" (1977, p. 115).

However, since the introduction of double loop learning, various broadening perspectives and terms have been presented to us. Terms such as *triple loop learning* (Isaacs, 1993; Flood & Romm, 1996a, 1996b; Hargrove, 1996; Taket, 1998) and *multiloop learning* (Pruijt, 1996; Baas, 2005; Li, Bontcheva, Aswani, Peters, & Cunningham, 2005) were used in articles and reports throughout the 1990s and may still be observed nowadays.

A REVOLUTIONARY LEARNING PROCESS

This article introduces a perception of organizational learning that although continuously expanded since Argyris's insights about double loop learning, has not before been perceived as having such a comprehensive and revolutionary scope: ecumenical learning.

Ecumenical learning is a transformational learning process in which a continuous, proactive approach toward improvement is applied with consideration of stakeholders at the immediate, intermediate, and distant level. In the most fundamental sense, single loop learning asks: "Change, how?" Double loop learning adds, "Change, why?" Triple and multiloop learning add, "Change, to what purpose?" The common factor among the above learning processes is the limitation to internal consequences and dynamics. Ecumenical learning transcends these limitations by asking all of the above and more: "Change: How? Why? To what purpose? And to what effect for all stakeholders at the current and future immediate, intermediate, and distant level?"

The underlying thought process is a simple one, particularly when considering the current massive trend toward globalization. Leaders of contemporary organizations, particularly those who aspire to guide their business toward becoming a leader in its industry and if possible in other industries as well, have to realize that established rules and practices should be subject to review not only internally (within the current scope of the organization's return on investment and its, most likely, changed processes and procedures) but also externally (within the scope of their impact on the organization's performance in its current industry and in the industries that it is targeting for entrance).

Then, after the review process, the impact of the new course of action to be implemented should also be

measured against all foreseeable consequences for stakeholders: employees; customers; suppliers; legal, political, economic, and sociocultural environments; members of the society in which the organization operates; and members of other societies the organization does business with in some way. In this impact estimation, the organization's management should not forget the effect on the natural environment, which is a growing point of concern to all inhabitants of our planet.

Description of the Ecumenical Learning Process

So, how could such an ecumenical learning process take place? Here is a possible scenario:

1. First, either a deviation from the routine surfaces or an insight emerges about the need for a change in the status quo. Thus the ecumenical learning process does not necessarily start only when a problem arises; it can become the logical consequence of a continuous quest toward instigating advancement in all departments of the organization. To ensure this movement, top management could consider assembling an interdepartmental team of change activists, which should hold regular meetings with the various departments to continue sparking enthusiasm for critical review of established processes and procedures and, consequently, proposed transformation.

2. The department management involved, along with the interdepartmental team of change activists, critically reviews and questions the rule or process in place for the detected deviation or outmoded process, along with its applicability given the current (changed) circumstances for the organization and its environment: double loop learning is implemented so far. It is important here that departmental managers are updated regularly on the organization's mission—and if possible also on top management's vision for the coming two to five years—to know when rules need review or replacement because of changes in organizational direction coming in the near future. This updating process could become part of the responsibilities of the interdepartmental team of change activists.

3. Depending on the perceived importance of the deviation or process to be altered, top management may get involved to apply benchmarking and consider alternatives to the rule or procedure. This step may elevate the newly considered solution from a mere incremental innovation to a potentially revolutionary transformation, one that management hopes will not only result in enhanced production within the organization but also

advance the organization's position toward becoming a leader in its industry. The most preferred outcome, of course, is that the organization will instigate an entire revolution within its industry and other related industries through its new application.

4. While evaluating the potential changes this new application could bring to the organization and its industry, top leadership should also evaluate the ramifications for other stakeholders (that is, employees, customers, suppliers, and societies in which the organization operates) as well as the impact on the natural environment.

5. The learned experiences should regularly be communicated to middle management so that learning gets distributed to all segments of the organization.

Figure 1 is a simplified illustration of this scenario and the ways in which the various stakeholders would be involved, as follows:

-   The ecumenical learning process starts with established processes (1).
-   The departmental management and the interdepartmental team of change activists engage in review of these established procedures. Continuous learning happens (2).
-   Through this learning, management and the team of change activists consider the impact of potential process changes on the entire organization, and they may involve top management, depending on the size of the pending innovation (3).
-   As part of this continuous learning process (1, 2, and 3), the organization benchmarks its processes against those of competitors and potential competitors (4) and considers the ramifications for all other immediate and nonimmediate stakeholders as well (4).
-   The impulses received from these stakeholders are all considered, communicated to all levels of management, and implemented to the well-being of the organization and its stakeholders (5), which completes the cycle, and establishes new procedures and processes. After this, the cycle continues.

Benefits of Ecumenical Learning for Stakeholders

As mentioned earlier, ecumenical learning is geared toward advancing all stakeholders, internal as well as external. When a manager or human performance technology (HPT) professional is reviewing the ways ecumenical learning can benefit various groups of stakeholders, the following insights can be shared:
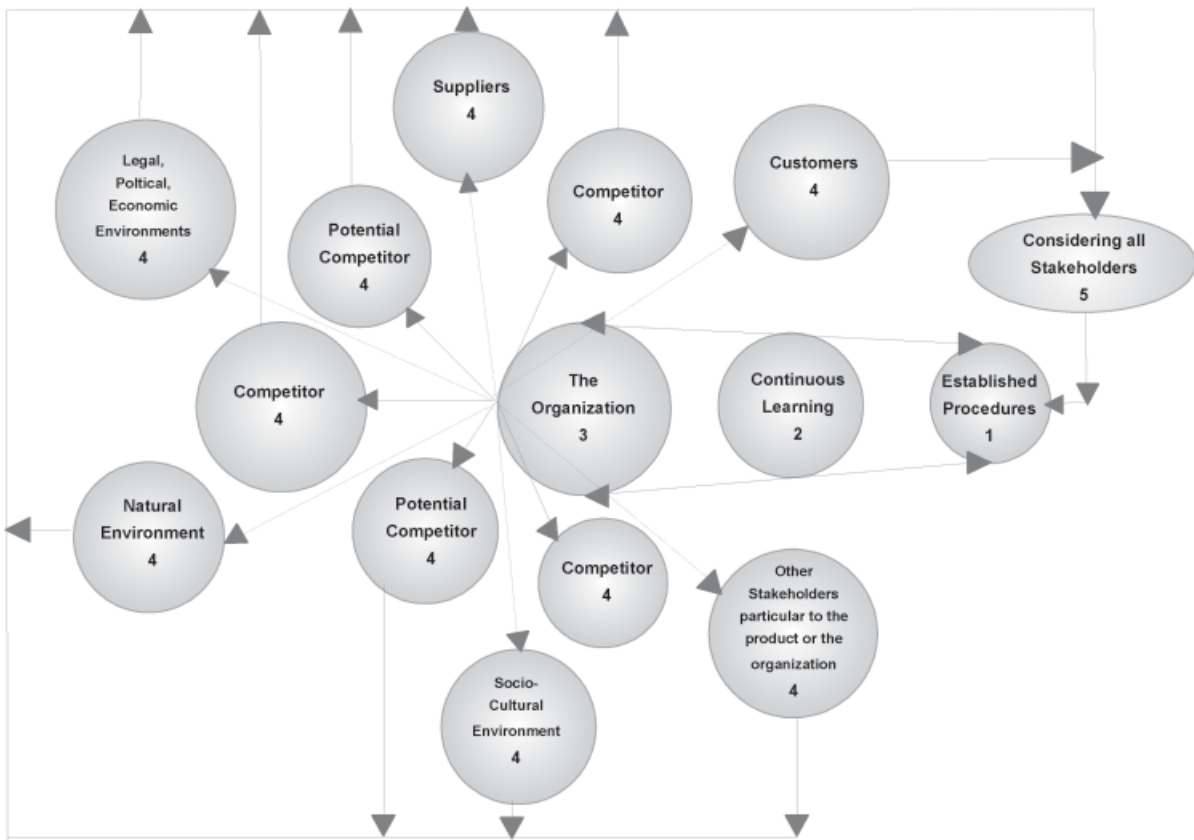
FIGURE 1. THE ECUMENICAL LEARNING PROCESS

The Management. When implemented properly, ecumenical learning can be a continuous cycle of renewal and enhanced performance, resulting in improved quantities and qualities of product units. A continuous review of processes and the subsequent improvement of those that are eligible for upgrade will also result in greater communication between management and workers at all levels. Particularly when an interdepartmental team of change activists gets established, the mutual recognition, understanding, respect, and ability to see the bigger picture of the organization's reason for existence will get enhanced. Black, Oliver, Howell, and King (2006) report that "dynamic interactions of leaders and followers often result in important strategic resources and competencies that are critical to an organization's success" (p. 39). Implementing and nurturing the ecumenical learning process will improve relationships throughout the organization and enhance job satisfaction at all levels. This will provide management the guarantee of a superb track record and a great organization.

The Employees. Cross (2006) avows, "Nothing is more important to business success than the knowledge and know-how of workers" (p. 42). Rowden and Conine (2005) agree that there is a "need for managers to make learning opportunities available to enhance overall job satisfaction" (p. 215). When involved in a continuous, all-encompassing learning mode at work, employees cannot help but learn as well, thus enhancing their own skills. At the internal level, it will help workers find meaning in their daily activities. At the external level, it will enhance workers' insights into processes that keep the organization progressing toward industry leadership. Each individual worker will then also continue to learn, which will elevate his or her marketability. However, as long as the organization maintains good communication levels and fosters strong employee connections within the learning process, workers will not easily feel the need to look elsewhere for occupation.

The Organization. A learning organization is one that will display an enhanced level of vision and flexibility. For example, in a longitudinal study of 22 UK manufacturing companies, Shipton, West, Dawson, Birdi, and Patterson (2006) examined the relationship between HR practices and product and technological innovation. They found

Leaders of contemporary organizations . . . have to realize that established rules and practices should be subject to review not only internally . . . but also externally.

that "training, induction, team working, appraisal and exploratory learning focus are all predictors of innovation" (p. 3). All of these practices are incorporated in the ecumenical learning approach. When everybody in the workplace is in a continuous learning mode, an organization will not easily fall prey to any form of myopia or inertia. On the contrary! An organization that engages in ecumenical learning will develop the ability to surpass its competitors through its habit of continuous renewal. Moreover, this organization has a high likelihood of emerging as a driving force and role model for competitors who engage in benchmarking to adopt best practices from each other.

The Customers. Osterlund and Loven (2005) affirm that "the design of a new product is a result of the competence resource available to the company. Developing the competence resources is an organizational learning process going from the individual through the group level to the organization." Osterlund and Loven continue, "If the competence resource reacts relatively slowly to meet requests in the demand from the company customers for changed knowledge in its products, it has a high inertia" (p. 547). This problem is presumably nonexistent in an organization that implements ecumenical learning. If this form of continuous reflective learning is applied, the customer will benefit for two reasons. First and foremost, the customer is purchasing services or goods from an organization that is involved in continuous improvement. Second, the customer of such an organization will find openness toward his or her suggestions. This should increase the level of connectedness between the organization and its customers and enhance customer loyalty.

The Environment. Improved processes result in more effective and efficient use of resources. Less waste of valuable resources occurs, and greater respect for maintaining the health of the environment is established. Cramer (2005) expounds on the positive consequences of learning on the environment by explaining that stimulation of learning processes in an organization requires involvement of all employees, which in turn enhances "the exchange of ideas about the relevance and merits of corporate social responsibility" (p. 256).

PREREQUISITES TO ECUMENICAL LEARNING

Ecumenical learning is a powerful process for enhancing organizational and individual performance, but the HPT professional who plans to facilitate this comprehensive type of learning within an organization must first ensure that two prerequisites are in place:

1. Top management must harbor the appropriate mindset and subsequently commit to an ecumenical learning process because of its potential widespread impact and its effect on the progression of organizational learning. Only top management has the scope of control needed to activate this level of change.

2. The organization should be devoid of imposing, decelerating hierarchical processes that make communication between departmental management and top-level leadership a long and cumbersome effort. 🔺

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JOAN F. MARQUES facilitates courses in business and management at Woodbury University in Burbank, California. She has authored two books on the topics of leadership and global awareness and is currently in the process of publishing four books dealing with workplace spirituality, leadership, and personal excellence. She presents a weekly radio column in the Netherlands and regularly coorganizes and presents workshops for business and nonprofit entities in the Los Angeles area through the Business Renaissance Institute (www.bri-usa.com), which she cofounded in 2004. She holds a BSc in business economics; an MBA in business administration; and an EdD degree in organizational leadership. She may be reached at jmarques01@earthlink.net.