

“Non-judgment, in mindfulness theory, is accepting the current state as part of a constant flow of changing experiences. This paradigm suggests that letting go of judgment strengthens the mind, and it challenges the illusion that over-thinking something gives one control over it.”

Mindfulness and Experiential Learning

By Bauback Yeganeh
and David Kolb

Over the last forty years researchers from many different theoretical perspectives have discovered that individuals develop consistent, routinized approaches to learning called learning styles (Sims and Sims 2006). Of the models that have emerged, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has largely influenced leadership and organization development. The experiential learning cycle is one of the most well-known illustrations in management education and has become the key theoretical model to express the nature of experiential learning (Cunningham, 1994).

Experiential learning theory also forms some of the basis for notions of the learning organization (Vince, 1998; Casey, 1993; Senge, 1990). Furthermore, organizational research and practice supports the premise that when learning is defined holistically as the basic process of human adaptation, it subsumes more specialized managerial processes such as entrepreneurial learning, strategy formulation, creativity, problem solving, decision-making, and leadership.

Learning styles are used to make sense of the world and adapt to it. But what happens when learners over-routinize their learning styles? Are they missing opportunities to reach their learning potentials? This article discusses how mindfulness techniques can enhance experiential learning and provides tools for practice in organizations. Mindfulness is an age old practice used to overcome the tendency to “sleep walk” repetitively through our lives. In recent times it has been accepted into mainstream psychology, social psychology,

and medicine. Empirical studies are now finding statistical support for what many have known for two millennia: that practicing mindfulness enhances mental and physical health, creativity, and contextual learning. In a world of flux and rapidity, living mindlessly can result in a host of problems including but not limited to: tunnel vision, increased stress, reduced physical health, reduced creativity, and difficulty navigating complex systems. As our sister fields of psychology and social psychology grow mindfulness research and practices, our field must as well. In this article we explore and discuss mindfulness as a tool to assist learners in unlocking their full learning potential in organizations.

Mindfulness

So what exactly is mindfulness? Any construct that has existed for thousands of years has many definitions. We would like to offer two of the most widely accepted descriptions of mindfulness. In our research with Darren Good at Case Western Reserve University, we found two predominant streams of mindfulness research and practice, meditative mindfulness and socio-cognitive mindfulness (Good & Yeganeh, 2006; Yeganeh, 2008).

Meditative Mindfulness. Although it is widely used as part of a secular mindfulness practice, mindfulness is the core of Buddhist meditation (Kabat Zinn, 1994). Thich Nhat Hanh, Gunaratana, Kabat-Zinn, and other present day authors advocate developing mindfulness through

meditation techniques to help people heal themselves and live intentionally. A distinction of meditative mindfulness is that it requires a discipline of anchoring the mind in the present moment. This is often accompanied with a practice of awareness and acceptance through breathing. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p.4). Non-judgment, in mindfulness theory, is accepting the current state as part of a constant flow of changing experiences. This paradigm suggests that letting go of judgment strengthens the mind, and it challenges the illusion that over-thinking something gives one control over it. Authors who discuss mindfulness within these parameters also talk about the antithesis of mindfulness which is mindlessness, or a state of autopilot and lack of intention. Are you aware of your breathing right now? Try some deep calm breaths from the diaphragm prior to reading on. Try practicing acceptance of whatever you are experiencing in the moment by letting go of evaluation and judgment.

Socio-cognitive mindfulness. Developed by social psychologists, this understanding of mindfulness emphasizes cognitive categorization, context and situational awareness (Langer 1997; Langer, 2000). Harvard social psychologist Ellen Langer, often relates mindfulness to learning:

“When we are mindful, we implicitly or explicitly (1) view a situation from several perspectives, (2) see information presented in the situation as novel, (3) attend to the context in which we perceive the information, and eventually, (4) create new categories through which this information may be understood.” (Langer, 1997, p.111)

Langer (1997) argues that our school systems largely encourage mindless learning through the accumulation of “objective” truths, rather than mindful learning which places a value on context, uncertainty, and doubt. As with meditative mindfulness, socio-cognitive mindfulness authors contrast mindfulness with mindlessness,

which is described as automatic behavior. When mindless, “we act like automatons who have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present.” (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p.2). Mindfulness from the socio-cognitive perspective requires broadening one’s repertoire of cognitive categories. The idea of creating new categories was influenced by Langer’s earlier studies in bias and prejudice. Explaining the practical benefits she illustrates that “If we describe someone we dislike intensely, a single statement usually does it. But if, instead, we are forced to describe the person in great detail, eventually there will be some quality we appreciate” (Langer, 1989, p.66). One of the reasons Langer’s work is so compelling is that it thoroughly supports the notion that simple labels (e.g., good and evil) do not accurately reflect the complexity of the world. Instead they allow for mindless rationalizations that justify a broad range of dysfunctional behaviors, from ineffective to criminal. Are you aware of how you are sorting and labeling what you are reading right now? Are you aware of the images, memories, and thoughts that your mind is recalling as you are reading? Try exploring one or two categories you have been using while digesting this article thus far.

One way to distinguish the two schools of thought is that meditative mindfulness, with its focus on present centered awareness, describes an internal process required to maintain a mindful state, where socio-cognitive mindfulness definitions seem to focus on cognitive applications of mindfulness (e.g. how we can more effectively sort out experiences and make sense of the world based on new mental categories/models). Furthermore, meditative mindfulness authors offer techniques in practicing mindfulness through breathing, acceptance and present centered awareness. Socio-

Figure 1: Meditative and Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness/Mindlessness Comparison

Socio-Cognitive Mindfulness	Similarities	Meditative Mindfulness
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sensitivity to context 2. Openness to new information 3. Novel distinction/New Categories 4. Multiple Perspectives 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Awareness 2. Novelty 3. Engagement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present-centered 2. Nonjudgmental 3. Purposeful
Socio-Cognitive Mindlessness	Similarities	Meditative Mindlessness
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Autopilot 2. Following predetermined rules 3. Engaged in routinized behaviors 4. Rigid perspectives 5. Lacking capacity for variation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Autopilot 2. Rigid Biases 3. Predetermined Rules 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Habitual Reactions 2. Living in past/future 3. Judgment/Evaluation 4. Autopilot

cognitive mindfulness deemphasizes meditation, suggesting supplemental practices such as placing a value on doubt, looking for disconfirming data, and producing new ways of thinking and acting. Each of these approaches offer research streams in which a person’s degree of mindfulness is measured through statistically validated self-report assessments. Meditative mindfulness is often measured by Brown & Ryan’s Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and socio-cognitive mindfulness is measured by the Langer Mindfulness Scale (LMS) (Bodner, 2000). A factor analyses (Yeganeh, 2006) of these two scales completed by 314 participants confirmed multiple and unique dimensions to mindfulness. Our research supports the following multi-dimensional definition of mindfulness:

Mindfulness is a state in which an individual:

1. focuses on present and direct experience
2. is intentionally aware and attentive
3. accepts life as an emergent process of change

Mindfulness and Experiential Learning

Building on this research, we began to explore the notion that mindfulness might increase the effectiveness of learning from experience. Specifically we designed a study to explore the learning style(s) of mindful individuals using the two mindfulness scales just described and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb 2007) based on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). By understanding the relationship between mindfulness and experiential learning styles, we could begin to design

mindful experiential learning practices to be used in organizations.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of *grasping* and *transforming* experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.41). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of *grasping* experience—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC)—and two dialectically related modes of *transforming* experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner “touches all the bases”—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate *concrete experiences* (*experiencing*) are the basis for observations and *reflections*. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into *abstract concepts* (*thinking*) from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be *actively tested* and serve as guides in creating new experiences (see Figure 2).

Learning style describes the unique ways that individuals spiral through the learning cycle based on their preference for the four different learning modes—CE, RO, AC, & AE. Because of our genetic makeup, our particular life experiences, and the demands of our present environment, we develop a preferred way of choosing among these four learning modes. We resolve the conflict between being concrete or abstract and between being active or reflective in patterned, characteristic ways. ELT posits that learning is the major determinant of human development and how individuals learn shapes the course of their personal development. Previous research (Kolb 1984) has shown that learning styles are influenced by personality type, culture, educational specialization, career choice, and current job role and tasks.

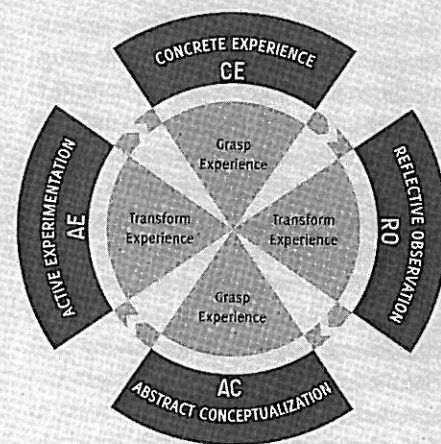
Our hypotheses about the relationship between mindfulness and learning

style were influenced by William James, the originator of the theory of experience on which ELT is based. James (1890) stated, “no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before” (p.155). The mind often neglects the rich context available for observation that makes experience unique. Instead it often automatically labels stimuli based on limited exposure and moves on to the next stimulus to under-observe. To extend this further, our labels of work experiences such as productive, boring, awful, successful, urgent, relaxed, and so on are also often based in automatically categorizing experience, rather than being fully present in the unique context of the moment. James’ emphasis on immediate direct sensual experience is exactly the focus on here and now experience that has been characterized by mindfulness for thousands of years. James also emphasized the importance of attention. He defines a spiral of interest-attention-selection similar to the experiential learning cycle that creates a continuous ongoing flow of experience summarized in the pithy statement—“My experience is what I agree to attend to.” (1890, p. 403). This also is a central element of mindfulness.

Supporting these links between learning from experience and mindfulness, our research found that individuals who scored high on Langer’s mindfulness scale emphasized direct concrete experience in their learning style (Yeganeh, 2006). We also found that individuals scoring high on mindfulness did not score high on reflective observation, suggesting that they were not “lost in thought” or rumination but were attentive to their experiences. The results suggest that the practice of mindfulness could help individuals learn from experience in two ways:

1. Encouraging a focus on here-and-now experience uncluttered by preconceptions and bias
2. Intentionally guiding their learning process by paying attention to how they are going through the phases of the learning cycle

Figure 2:
THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE



Mindfulness becomes important when we consider *how* we choose to process and learn from events at work. Learning style determines the way we process the possibilities of each new emerging experience, which in turn determines the range of choices and decisions we see. The choices and decisions we make to some extent determine the events we work through, and these events influence our future choices. Thus, people create themselves and their learning styles through the choices of the actual occasions they live through. For many, this learning style choice has become relatively unconscious, comprised of deeply patterned routines applied globally to learning situations. Mindfulness can put the control of learning back in the learner’s hands.

Practicing Mindful Experiential Learning

As it relates to mindfulness, ELT provides a grounded explanation of the learning processes of the mind when making sense of the environment (Zull 2002). The mind makes sense of complex environments by generalizing. In doing so, rules and guidelines are abstracted (AC) from experiences (CE) which are then acted (AE) and/or reflected (RO) on. Indeed this is what has enabled early civilizations to take shelter when weather worsens, use fire to ward off nocturnal scavengers, seek medicine when ill, teach right from wrong, and so on and so forth. It is clear that this propensity to generalize can be a gift, enabling us to thrive. However, the process of generalizing from experience can also result in

rumination, bigotry, fortunetelling, stress, and the like; all of which decrease learning ability. The ability to generalize is neutral; it is how we go about doing so that determines generative or degenerative outcome. Incorporating mindfulness practices into experiential learning processes will help organization members become more intentional about how and when they learn. An underlying assumption in mindful experiential learning is that the quality of experiential learning increases as organization members are more intentional. Practical examples of mindful experiential learning in organizations are limitless. For example, organizational teams can increase awareness of how individuals work with one another in specific situations, and who is best for specific kinds of work on a team. Leaders can better manage complex projects without making rash decisions based on limited information. Strategy makers can become more effective in processes by rethinking how data is collected and considered.

Mindfulness can free the mind to intentionally think and create in new ways. Those with rigorous mindfulness practices routinely practice present centered awareness. Meditation is a powerful way to discipline the mind into practicing mindfulness. However, there are also ways to practice mindfulness for those who are not dedicated to a meditation program. One thing is certain, if organization members are interested in developing mindful experiential learning skills, it is vital to begin a mindfulness routine, whether through meditation or not. For those interested in practicing mindfulness without meditation, it is important to find a way to regularly attend to one's state in order to be intentional in subsequent thoughts and behaviors. Self-monitoring when coupled with practicing acceptance creates new opportunities to think and act in learning situations. This requires a routine of "checking-in" with the self, which can be done through regular journaling, questioning, and/or taking several deep breaths from the diaphragm while accepting the present moment. Some mistakenly confuse acceptance with apathy, which it is not. In mindfulness theory, acceptance

disallows the mind and body to suffer from things beyond one's control. This can paradoxically enable one to attain goals that may have otherwise been self-sabotaged by stress and attempts at over-controlling. Working toward goals is congruent with practicing mindful experiential learning in organizations. However having an overbearing outcome-orientation in which preoccupation with a specific result hinders work effectiveness, is a classic sign of mindlessness.

Tools for Mindful Learning

Those who use the Kolb Learning Style Inventory to assess their learning style often decide that they wish to develop their capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle—experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC) and acting (AE). In some cases this is based on a desire to develop a weak mode in their learning style. In others it may be to increase capability in a mode that is particularly important for their learning tasks. Because of the dialectic relationships among the learning modes, inhibiting dominating modes can be as effective in developing strengths as actively developing inhibited modes. Overall learning effectiveness is improved when individuals are highly skilled in engaging all four modes of the learning cycle at contextually appropriate times.

We have created a practical model (Figure 3) from mindfulness and experiential learning work that answers the following question: What are various mindfulness practices that can be used to develop the capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle in organizations? The next section provides some useful tools to improve specific modes of experiential learning through mindfulness. Keep in mind that the key to being mindful when learning is intentionality, as opposed to being on autopilot in any of the phases.

Figure 3: Mindful Experiential Learning Practice Guide

MINDFUL PRACTICES

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

- **CE** Diaphragm breathing—relaxing the physiological state
- Focus on a new touch, sound, sight, smell, so your mind re-sets and switches off autopilot

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION

- **RO** Become aware of critical times that you are impulsive
- Suspend impulsive thoughts and actions
- Practice sitting with thoughts and feelings rather than acting on them
- Practice acceptance rather than judgement

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

- **AC** Question assumptions you are making in this moment
- Consider other people's perspectives
- Doubt your personal "truth"
- Seek shades of gray rather than dichotomous thinking

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

- **AE** Practice novel questioning—shift the conversation by asking questions that generate possibilities
- Think of thoughts and behaviors that you admire in another during a given situation and practice them
- Experiment by responding to people and events in ways that you normally do not

Developing the capacity for experiencing (CE)

This requires fully opening oneself to direct experience. Direct experience exists only in the here-and-now, a present moment of endless depth and extension that can never be fully comprehended. In fact, being heavily biased in the thinking mode (being too much "in your head") can inhibit the ability to directly sense and feel the immediate moment. Engagement in concrete experience can be enhanced by being present in the moment and attending to direct sensations and feelings. This presence and attention are particularly important for relationships. Interpersonal skills of leadership, relationship and giving and receiving, can improve by developing the experiencing mode of learning. Those who tend to be heavy in thinking and light on experiencing may wish to write out lists of everything floating around in their minds. This can include "to do's", ideas, concerns, and anything else cluttering the mind. The mind often replays these thoughts to maintain control over them. Once thoughts are written out, it is easier to practice engaging in the present moment, knowing that the list is only a glance away if something seems forgotten at a later date. Clearing

the mind is a central tool for shifting from abstract thought into engaging present moment experience. Additionally, any time words are being used to think or speak, abstract thinking is happening. Words are symbols, representing only a fraction of full experience. To develop the capacity for experiencing, one can practice observing the environment while consciously shifting the mind away from words that arise, and back to the momentary observation. Taking deep breaths while doing this, anchors the mind in momentary awareness of perception: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, and away from abstract thought. If thoughts appear in the mind, one can gently but firmly re-focus on the breath and away from thinking in order to be more fully present. Deep breathing is a powerful intervention for strengthening the ability to experience. Most of us breathe shallowly, especially when engaged in tasks that pull us away from momentary awareness. Anchor points for creating a mindful learning routine can be as simple as routinely taking deep breaths from the diaphragm. In order to remember breathing, one can practice routine self check-ins, asking “how deeply am I breathing right now?” Creating reminder cues such as a pen dot on the hand, and/or a symbol at the desk can help as well. Because the practices suggested to engage in experience include adaptations of meditation, they often come with a host of benefits such as reduced stress, increased clarity, improved health, calmness, and creativity.

Developing the capacity for reflecting

Reflection requires space and time. It can be inhibited by impulsive desires and/or pressures to take action. It can be enhanced by the practices of deliberately viewing things from different perspective and empathy. Stillness and quieting the mind foster deep reflection. Information skills of sense-making, information gathering and information analysis can aid in the development and expression of the reflecting mode of learning. To practice this phase of mindful experiential learning, one can actively discover critical times of impulsive action and plan to suspend action during

these times through mindfulness. Focus on the physiological cues that signal when impulsivity is about to occur. When these cues arise, practicing redirecting the mind towards reflection can be a powerful tool. Those who feel quick to judge and act can routinely ask themselves “what actions have I been rushing into that I can sit with a bit longer to make sure I am being intentional?” This can be done numerous ways. One suggestion we offer clients is to program their computer calendars to announce this question on their screens every hour or few hours. Another useful practice is to hone in on one issue that requires reflection, and spend 10-15 minutes to generate new questions to answer about the issue. Create a question for yourself that you normally would not ponder, and place a value on doubt, rather than rushing into being correct. Finally, practice acceptance of the moment by identifying which actions are generative and which ones are just a way of trying to take control of an uncontrollable aspect of the environment.

Developing the capacity for thinking

Thinking requires the ability to cognitively represent and manipulate ideas. It can be distracted by intense direct emotion and sensations as well as pressure to act quickly. Engagement in thinking can be enhanced by practicing theoretical model building and the creation of scenarios for action. Analytical skills of theory building, data analysis and technology management can aid in the development and expression of the thinking mode of learning. From a mindfulness perspective, questioning assumptions can help to focus the mind in order to make “theories-in-use” intentional rather than automatic. Taking time to view assumptions from multiple perspectives can enrich thought. A way to do this is to experiment with how one would make sense of a situation if a current belief were untrue. Another tool is to consider the role that context plays in current mental models, and how these might differ if the context changed. Creating contextual knowledge rather than pursuing dichotomous thinking can strengthen the capacity

for abstract thought. Be aware that mindlessly shifting from abstract thought to concrete experience can interfere with learning in some scenarios. Practicing a focused routine of abstract questioning and seeking shades of gray can develop the mind’s ability to fully think in learning situations.

Developing the capacity for action

Acting requires commitment and involvement in the practical world of real consequences. In a sense it is the “bottom line” of the learning cycle, the place where internal experiencing, reflecting and thinking are tested in reality. Acting can be inhibited by too much internal processing in any of these three modes. Acting can be enhanced by courageous initiative-taking and the creation of cycles of goal-setting and feedback to monitor performance. Action skills of initiative, goal-setting and action-taking can aid in the development and expression of the acting mode of learning. Mindfulness can assist with this phase by helping learners be intentional about actions, especially when reflective observation is a more comfortable state for the learner. Asking people novel and thoughtful questions can be a safe and mindful way to begin practicing action. Another tool is having the learner envision all the ideal behaviors that he/she would like to practice. The learner then can decide which behaviors would be generative to practice in specific learning situations and begin practicing one or two of them mindfully. Learners who would like to move to action more often or more strongly will benefit from being aware of and releasing any automatic self-judgments, self-schemas, feelings and thoughts that support inaction. This can be accomplished through acceptance and breathing practices. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that acting isn’t just about filling space with behavior. Intentionally suspending behavior can be a mindful act as well.

Conclusion

Everybody has learning style preferences. Cultivating mindfulness can help organization members become more intentional

about how they think and behave in a given learning environment. In order to be more aware of learning processes, learners must find unique ways to engage in routines of momentary awareness. Regular practices of deep breathing can help create anchor points for learners to check in on thoughts and behaviors. In organizations it is helpful for learners to identify people who they can routinely check-in with on the degree to which they are being intentional in learning situations. These conversational anchors provide environmental cues to stay focused on a mindfulness practice and emotional support to remain optimistic. Using coaches who are well trained in mindfulness is also a powerful tool. Finally, we encourage learners not to be discouraged when facing difficulty in starting a mindful experiential learning practice. It may be best to try 1 or 2 specific mindful learning practices, and go from there. Anything more can be overwhelming and may actually inhibit progress. As techniques are mastered, additional methods can be added. In this article, we have provided mindful experiential learning practices that can improve the quality of learning in the four modes of experiential learning. These can be adapted to coaching processes, employee development programs, dialogue sessions, cultivating emotional intelligence, daily meeting practices and much more. We have presented new research and practical approaches to mindful experiential learning in organizations. We encourage others to develop innovative ways to use mindfulness in organizations and to share the results through articles and presentations so that one day using mindfulness in organizations becomes the norm. We believe it is needed more now than ever before.

Mindfulness is an age old tool to enhance life by reducing automaticity. Mindful experiential learning can be cultivated in organizations without mandating employees to commit to specific meditation practices. In many of our experiences with coaching leaders, simply presenting some of the practices discussed in this article has been enough to generate interest, resulting in self-driven exploration of mindful experiential learning. Experiential learning

theory helps us understand the mental architecture of learning. Mindfulness helps us understand processes by which the mind is aware, intentional, and accepting. Using the two together unlocks a powerful tool for empowered adult learning in organizations.

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"I've come to realize that there is a fatal flaw in that popular image of a group of people learning by reflecting on their experience. The flaw is this—everyone creates their own experience, everyone is having a different experience, and everyone is making up stories about each other's experience."

Learning from Collective Experience

A Different View of Organizational Learning

By Gervase R. Bushe

Organization Development has always been about helping groups, large and small, learn from their collective experience. To most people this means a group having a discussion about something that happened in the past, analyzing it and agreeing on what to do the same and differently in the future. This approach sounds like it should be a pretty straight forward thing to do; but as those of us who've been in the business a long time know, it often doesn't lead to much learning or change at all. As I've tried to understand this, especially in the context of how to create and sustain collaborative relationships in organizations, I've come to realize that there is a fatal flaw in that popular image of a group of people learning by reflecting on their experience. The flaw is this—everyone creates their own experience, everyone is having a different experience, and everyone is making up stories about each other's experience.

I'm addressing this article primarily to OD practitioners who, like me, have come to assume the truth of that last sentence. In this paper I'm going to start from this set of assumptions and describe a model and method I've developed to help people and groups learn from their collective experience. As will become clear, I'm operating in much the same territory as Argyris, Schon and Senge, but have developed a different approach to creating organizational learning. I begin by identifying the problems in how people normally experience and make sense of each other that creates the need for organizational learning and then I go on to define organizational

learning as follows: an inquiry into our patterns of organizing that leads to a positive change in those patterns. Then I describe a method I've developed, the "organizational learning conversation," that I believe creates genuine organizational learning, one conversation at a time.

A Model of Experience

If everyone creates their own experience, and everyone is having a different experience, then collectively learning from experience is a lot more complicated than it first appears. I've noticed that when people try to talk about what happened last week in order to learn from it, the first thing that happens is a subtle contest over who had the "right" experience. What actually happened? What's the right way to think about it? In any group trying to work in a collaborative fashion, this turns out to be an unhelpful conversation that can even lead to a decrease in collaboration.

If you think of collaboration as I do, as a relationship in which each person feels equally responsible for the success of their joint project or process, you can see why attempts to define who has the "right experience" reduce collaboration. If I end up being pressured or argued into abandoning my views and accepting your experience as the right one, I'm definitely going to feel less responsible for ensuing decisions. And if it's the boss who is having the "right experience," the easiest thing in the world to do is to make the boss responsible for the success of whatever

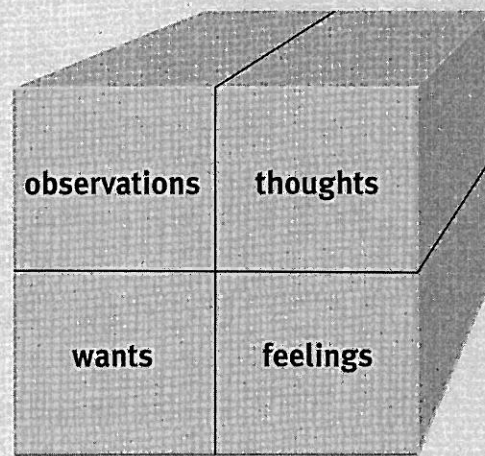
ensues. Collaboration in the sense of feeling personally responsible and committed goes out the window.

If we are going to learn from experience, we first need to get a lot more clarity about what experience is. The Experience Cube (Bushe, 2009) is a model of experience that proposes:

1. Experience only happens to a person here and now. People have memories of past experiences—but these are mental constructions that change and not actual experience (even though we often use the word to mean what happened to us in the past). Because of the nature of mental maps and sense-making processes (discussed below), the only way to learn from experience is to discuss it right here and right now or very soon thereafter.
2. Experience is composed of 4 elements: observations, thoughts, feelings and wants. **Observations** are what a video recorder would pick up. **Thoughts** are all mental constructs. **Feelings** are sensations and emotions. **Wants** are motives, aspirations, objectives and desires.
3. At every moment, a person is having all four elements of experience, but most people have not developed the awareness to recognize the entirety of their four-part experience. Some experience is near the surface of awareness and some is deep in the shadows. Everyone has different levels of awareness of the four elements of their experience, and everyone accesses different elements of their experience at different speeds.

From the point of view of this model, the key to self-awareness for leadership and consulting effectiveness is the ability to become aware of your moment-to-moment experience (observations, thoughts, feelings and wants). The only element of experience that has any objective validity is observations. All the rest are subjective and, therefore, have no claim to any validity beyond subjective validity. In order to learn from experience, people have to recognize that "my truth" is not "the truth"; that what I think, feel and want is only valid for me and that everyone else will naturally be hav-

Figure 1: The Experience Cube



(From Bushe, 2009)

ing different thoughts, feelings and wants. Learning from collective experience is not about getting people to have the same experience; it actually begins with understanding and acknowledging the variety of experiences taking place among the people involved.

We are Sense-Making Beings

As I mentioned in the introduction, the third thing that limits the usefulness of conventional attempts to collectively reflect on experience is our tendency to make up stories about each others' experience. As sense-making beings, people are compelled to make sense of others who are important to them. They do this by filling in the gaps of what they know about the other person's experience. If I know what you think but not what you feel or want, I make up a story about that to fill in the gaps. In order for my story to make sense, it has to fit with what I already believe to be true about you (my past acts of sense-making). Two things about this process tend to destroy collaboration and create a need for organizational learning. 1) People tend not to check out their stories with the person about whom they make them up. This is particularly true when they are having a bad experience of the other person. If a person is confused or upset about another's actions, they will seek out third parties with whom to make sense of the interaction. Having another person agree with one's story makes it seem more like an objective truth—and that "truth" will continue to influence further acts of sense-making. 2)

The stories people make up about others tend to be worse than the reality (what the other person is really thinking, feeling and wanting). There are many reasons why this is so, as follows: the impulse to be cautious in the face of uncertainty, organizations that have built up layers of cynicism, a tendency to personalize what actually has nothing to do with oneself, projecting negative self-traits onto others, and the general bias toward seeing the worst, which David Cooperrider calls a "deficit" mindset—are just some of the possible reasons.

Therefore, both the nature of experience and the process of sense-making can lead to a situation where everyone is having a different experience, everyone is making up stories about each other's experience, the stories get worse and worse and, over time, a toxic environment of gossip and distrust settles in. In the clinical research that I and my students have done for the past 15 years, we estimate that 4 out of 5 "conflicts" between people at work are a result of this process: people have made up inaccurate stories to make sense of others, and over time these stories have led to a total breakdown of collaboration. This is why we need organizational learning so urgently.

Organizational Learning

The phrase organizational learning has come to have a variety of meanings—from garden variety training to sophisticated models of collective sentience. As a concept, there isn't one "right" way to define it—rather one has to ask which way of

defining this concept is most useful, provides avenues for effective action or leads to new and better insights. I believe that for the phrase to be useful it has to refer to something beyond simple individual learning inside an organization.

To clarify organizational learning, we need to be precise about what is an organization. An organization is not its tasks or goals; an organization has tasks and goals. An organization is not its people; an organization has people that come and go. An organization is not its products, markets, or technologies. Rather, an organization is found in its processes of organizing—in the repetitious patterns of how people relate to each other while they work to gather and interpret information, solve problems, make decisions, manage conflict, and implement change in their efforts to accomplish the organization's purpose.

I believe that organizational learning takes place within the relationships that make up the organization. From this point of view, learning is a social, not an individual, phenomenon. I define learning as the outcome of an inquiry that produces knowledge and leads to change. Organizational learning happens when two or more people inquire into their patterns of organizing (how they work together) and produce knowledge that leads to a positive change in their patterns of interaction. It is the change in patterned relations that makes learning organizational and not simply individual. The patterns of organizing are "how things really get done around here." All the ways in which people usually interact while doing the business of the organization are what I mean by "patterns of organizing" or "patterns of interaction." Unless these patterns change, the organization doesn't really change. When people go through a major restructuring and then say "nothing really changed," what they mean is that the patterns of interaction didn't change.

Organizational Learning Conversations

My approach to organizational learning provides a method for having conversations about unproductive and dissatisfy-

ing patterns of interaction that leads to new knowledge and a positive change in the pattern - one that increases people's willingness to collaborate. Since so many of the problems or conflicts between people and groups that destroy collaboration are actually a product of their different experiences and sense-making, just trying to understand their own and each other's experience often makes the conflict go away. What follows is a concrete example of an organizational learning conversation.

I was running a week-long training program for 35 managers to teach them the skills of organizational learning while working on real organizational issues. There was a staff of six trainers. Because of the flexibility of this course, the staff met frequently to discuss what was happening and what to do next. On the evening of the third night, one of the staff, Bruce, voiced his desire to spend most of next day working with the small group he was leading. The rest of the staff thought that other, large-group activities were more appropriate. At this point I noticed Bruce did not participate much as we developed a plan for the next day. On the next morning, I announced the day's schedule to the assembled participants. From the back of the room, Bruce called out, "What? What's the plan?" I reiterated it. He said, "That's the plan?! When did that plan get decided?" I was starting to feel a little annoyed but tried not to show it as I said, "Last night at dinner." At this point he turned away, walked toward the back of the room, and muttered loudly, "Hmmm—I wonder where I was when that plan was decided."

Later that day the entire group of 35 managers was involved in a very tense and emotional discussion as people were finally telling the truth of their experience about some recent changes that had taken place in the organization. I was leading this segment of the workshop and had some clear goals about where interpersonal clarity needed to be increased. At one point a manager, Heather, voiced some issues that were important to her but that I considered tangential to the larger purpose of the session. She had finished talking and another person was about to speak when

Bruce stepped in and said, "I want to hear more from Heather." At that point I said, "I think what Heather has to say is important, but I'm concerned that we only have so much time and it is not focused on the issue we are dealing with here." Bruce said, "Yeah, well I still want to hear more from Heather." I looked at him pointedly, raised my voice, and said "NO." Bruce looked startled, turned on his heel, and walked back to his seat.

This response was a very ineffective way to deal with Bruce, and it was obvious to everyone in the room that Bruce and I had a "conflict." But the issue was ignored as we continued with the meeting. A few hours later Bruce and I met, to have a learning conversation about it. By this point I had gotten myself worked up at Bruce's "acting out" because he hadn't gotten his way. I thought his behavior that morning had been completely uncalled for and was feeling pretty self-righteous, especially because, in my mind, Bruce is more rigid about not letting others interfere in a session he is leading than I am. Here is how the conversation went.

Bruce: I need to talk about what happened this afternoon. I have to tell you that I did not like how you talked to me and I'm still angry about it.

Gervase: Yeah, well, I didn't like how I acted either, but obviously I was angry and that came out.

Bruce: Yeah, I've been wondering if something started going on before that incident.

Gervase: Of course! After what you did this morning, I was pretty upset.

Bruce: This morning? What did I do this morning?

I described the story I had made up about his behavior first thing in the morning. In my mind, he was still wanting to spend time in his small group and resisting the design the rest of us had agreed on. When he turned and muttered the way he had, I thought that he was complaining that his views had not been considered. I did not like him acting this way in front of the participants after the decisions had been made.

Bruce listened calmly to all of this and asked some questions to get clear about my experience. As I talked more about it, I realized that I had started getting upset with him the night before. My story, of which I hadn't been fully aware, was that he stopped participating in the design conversation because he hadn't gotten his way. By the morning I was already seeing him as petulant, and that affected how I experienced his behavior in the group. Then I had thought that he was attacking my leadership. So by the time the incident occurred in the afternoon, I was primed to experience Bruce's actions as attacks on my authority. My outburst was as much in response to thinking that he was being very inappropriate in managing his petulance as from feeling attacked.

Bruce asked me questions until both he and I thought that he was clear about what I had observed, thought, felt, and wanted; and then he told me his experience. He had not been aware that he was not participating the night before, but now realized that he had been preoccupied by some bad news he had received when he'd called home before dinner. He did not care that we did not meet in the small groups—it had been his preference but not a strong preference. That morning he really had not remembered the design conversation from the night before, and his loud mutter as he turned his back was intended to mock himself, not me. At that moment he had felt guilty about not having been tuned in to the design for the day and was mentally attacking himself, not me, for having zoned out. So, completely unaware of the experience I was having, he was pretty shocked when I said "NO" that afternoon.

After we got completely clear about each other's experience, Bruce said that he sometimes has this effect on people—they feel he is challenging their leadership. He isn't conscious of wanting to challenge their leadership and wants to learn more about how he creates that impression in others. Bruce owned that he had a part in this pattern that is still outside his awareness and he is learning more about it. I owned that the problem started for me during the planning meeting at dinner but that I wasn't paying attention to it and it got

out of hand. I realized that I should have checked the story I was making up about Bruce withdrawing because he didn't get his way instead of letting it fester just on the edge of my awareness (something I do too often). I also owned that when I don't get my way I sometimes withdraw and act petulant, and that I had projected this onto Bruce.

I asked Bruce how he felt about my leadership and he assured me that he was perfectly satisfied with the way I was running the workshop. He asked me how I felt about his participation; and I assured him that, except for that meeting, I was very pleased with his contributions. Bruce and I reaffirmed our deep regard and respect for each other. We later talked to the rest of the staff and the workshop participants about what we had learned.

That learning conversation lasted about 20 minutes. As you can see, once I began describing my experience I got clearer about my experience of Bruce. When we talked about things that had happened in the past, they were to help each other understand what each of us was observing, thinking, feeling and wanting right then, during our conversation. When he understood my experience, he was able to describe his own experience and show me where my sense making was way off. Once we got clear about each other's experience, the "conflict" went away.

Like so many organizational problems, the real issue was that he and I were operating from completely different perceptions and that I had an inaccurate story about him. Notice that we spent no time discussing whether Heather should have been given more air time. Sometimes people frame organizational learning as understanding and analyzing different theories-of-action. Should Heather's issue have been brought forward? What was the most appropriate intervention at that point? That might have been an interesting conversation to have had, but would have been irrelevant to understanding the underlying conflict that was developing between Bruce and me. If we had simply focused on Heather and gotten into a debate about what was right, probably nothing use-

ful would have resulted. Yet how many attempts to resolve conflict at work focus on figuring out the "right way" to do things and thus lead to little or no change?

In an organizational learning conversation, each person works to a) understand their own experience, b) describe their experience to the other, and c) fully understand the other person's experience. This happens in a scripted, ritualized fashion where each person takes a turn having their experience explored and understood without anyone trying to change it or fix it. Again our research shows that 4 out of 5 times, simply doing this changes the problem pattern and increases collaboration.

Two things seem to be critical to making this work. One is the right attitude: the purpose of the conversation is for each person to learn more about their own and the other's experience, not to try and change them. The second is a simple technique: one person's experience is fully explored and understood, using the experience cube as a guide, before the other person responds to anything they have heard. This means a person needs to be able to fully summarize and describe what the other person observed, thought, felt, and wanted before they start talking about their own, different experience. It usually requires some coaching to stop people when they are getting reactive and to ask them to keep listening and summarizing. What normally happens is when person B hears person A's inaccurate perceptions they want to stop A and clear up the inaccuracy before they have learned anything more about A's perceptions. This seems to stop learning dead in its tracks.

There is a third thing that is critical when the people having the conversation haven't had many learning conversations with each other or there is a lot of tension in the relationship. Between each transition (when each person shifts from either describing their experience to listening to the other's experience) each person should do a lap around the experience cube, describing their experience in the moment. So, as person A finishes describing her experience of the issues, and person B has adequately summarized it, person A describes what she is observ-

ing, thinking, feeling, and wanting in that moment. Then person B describes what he is observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting in that moment. Then Person B proceeds to describe his experience of the issues and his response to what he has just heard from A. Checking each person's in the moment experience between each transition helps to reduce the inaccurate sense-making that is going on in the midst of the conversation and can sometimes be the most important part of the conversation, especially if the very pattern that is causing problems for the two people shows up in the conversation itself.

There are skills and perspectives I haven't discussed here that help people

consistently have successful learning conversations (Bushe, 2009), but most people can have these conversations if facilitated by someone competent in helping people increase their awareness of their in the moment experience. In this way organizational learning can happen one conversation at a time, rippling out through the system as people help themselves and each other get clear about what their collective experience actually is. Ultimately, they discover that people don't have to have the same experience in order for them to work collaboratively, and what sustains collaboration in the long run is allowing the diversity of experience to surface and be acknowledged.

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