

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ
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**ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AS A COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE
PROCESS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LEADERSHIP ROLE**

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Abstract: *It is important for organizations to maintain and support the learning ability and willingness of their members. Leaders play a catalytic role in such organizational communication and knowledge processes. This article is based on a literature review of books, online articles and journals. It first examines the concept of learning in its general meaning and then goes on to discuss the relationship between individual and organizational learning. The interdependent knowledge processes underlying these forms of learning are highlighted and the findings of the three-level learning model according to Argyris/Schön are drawn upon. In this context, the focus is placed on the role of leadership, examining the changing image and understanding of leadership in terms of how it relates to organizational learning processes. Two diametrically opposed concepts of leadership are examined in detail. The question of how leadership can be shaped in times of change in such a way that organizational learning can be promoted and optimized is explored. It should be noted that a modern leadership approach can be considered particularly conducive to elaborate learning and knowledge processes.*

Keywords: *organizations; learning; communication; knowledge processes; leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a process that accompanies people from their school and training days and does not end when they complete their academic career. It is not without reason that there is frequent talk of ‘lifelong learning’ (Erpenbeck/Sauter/Sauter 2016, p. 1). Individual learning is also an essential prerequisite for organizations to be able to learn and thus realize collective information and knowledge processes (Behrmann 2010, p. 96). The dimensions in which learning can take place in organizations can be described using the popular three-level learning model according to Argyris/Schön (Moning/Petersen 2010, pp. 172–174). Since leaders have a special social relationship with the employees they lead (Wunderer 2007, p. 4), it is important to examine their significance for individual and organizational learning and knowledge processes. This requires contrasting the traditional understanding of leadership with a modern leadership approach and analyzing the interdependence of the respective leadership approach and organizational learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This publication is based on a literature review that first examines the concept of learning in its general understanding and the relationship between individual and organizational learning. It then describes an existing model for learning in organizations. This is followed by an examination of the relationship between leadership, knowledge transfer, and learning processes, as well as an analysis of the characteristics of traditional and modern leadership. Based on this in-depth analysis, the three-level learning model described by Argyris/Schön is placed in the context of leadership. This literature review includes books, online sources and journals.

RESULTS

Learning – what does this mean?

To emphasise the importance and dynamics of the concept of learning in general, it is worth mentioning the following statement by the English composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976):

‘Learning is like rowing against the current. As soon as you stop, you drift backwards’ (Woxikon 2026).

Even though most people are probably familiar with the concept of learning from their school and training days, it is nevertheless important to examine it from a scientific perspective:

‘LEARNING is a permanent change in behavior based on experience – that is the most general definition. A more recent definition understands LEARNING as the expansion of knowledge, abilities and skills for coping with life situations’ (Siebert 2010, p. 190).

The importance of this learning process, which can be observed in behavior, is made clear in the following: ‘LEARNING is considered a prerequisite for survival, because humans, due to their deficient instincts, are forced to constantly adapt to changes in their environment, but are also capable of shaping their environment’ (Siebert 2010, p. 190).

This means that learning is inextricably linked to (environmental) changes, to which humans respond by changing or adapting their behavior. As vividly described in the above quote, learning is not something static; rather, humans are constantly in motion, i.e. involved in learning processes that are of existential importance to them, as Siebert has already stated.

But what does this mean in the context of an organization, i.e. how is learning connected to this in such a way that we can speak of organizational learning?

At this point, we should first mention the organization that every person is confronted with sooner or later in the course of their life: the workplace.

‘LEARNING AT WORK is the oldest and most widespread form of professional qualification. It is a form of learning that relates to the specific subject of the work and takes place at work and through work’ (Dehnbostel 2010, p. 192).

According to Severing, ‘learning outside educational institutions is referred to as INFORMAL LEARNING’ (Severing 2010, p. 148). However, compared to formal education, this informal learning is not considered an inferior or secondary form of learning, but is regarded as equally important and indispensable (Severing 2010, p. 148).

The concept of learning is now applied not only to humans or ‘living beings’, ‘but also to other “systems”’, ‘e.g. “learning organizations”’. A distinction must be made here ‘between personal LEARNING and organizational LEARNING’ (Siebert 2010, p. 192).

In this respect, it should be noted that the above statements can be applied analogously to organizations. Here, too, it is said that ‘organizational learning ability is a decisive factor for survival [...]’ (Behrmann 1998, p. 143).

The relationship between individual and organizational learning based on a diagram with explanation

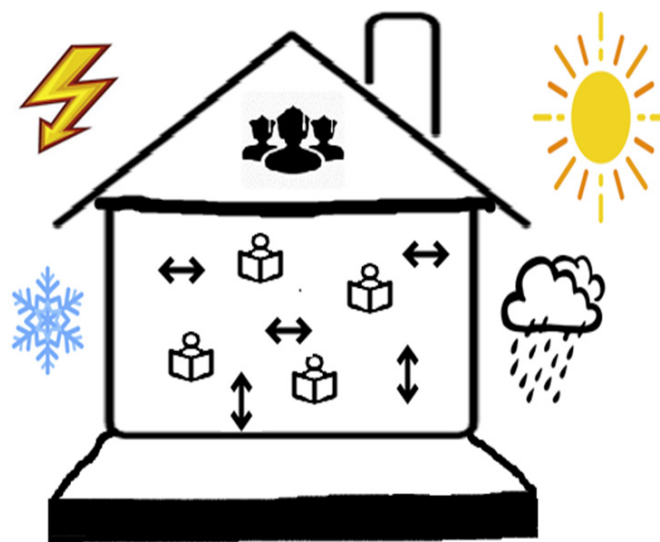


Fig. 1. Own diagram based on Behrmann 2010, 93–96

The diagram shows the two levels of individual and organizational learning as a metaphor.

The organization, symbolically represented as a house, is firmly anchored on solid ground, the foundation. Inside this house are the members of the organization, i.e. the individuals who symbolically hold a book in their hands to represent learning or the acquisition of education and knowledge. However, these individuals do not stand alone and independently in this space, but interact with each other and among themselves, as represented by the double-sided arrows. The roof and thus the top of the house consists of people wearing doctoral hats, symbolizing educational growth and learning progress. Around the house, the various weather conditions are depicted in the form of rain, sun, etc., i.e. this represents the environment of the organization, which, in addition to favorable times – proverbially sunny times – also has less favorable times in the form of rain or thunderstorms.

This makes it clear ‘that organizational learning, on the one hand, concerns changes in the thinking, actions and knowledge of individuals (organization members) and, on the other hand, describes changes in the framework of meaning and order within an organization, which provides knowledge about the organization and about how to manage actions and solve problems [...]’ (Behrmann 2010, p. 94).

It goes on to say that organizational learning initially relates to interaction processes between individuals. They perceive contradictions when there are deviations or disruptions in their usual processes. This irritation in turn results in revisions of interaction patterns, which are transferred to the organization and change its generative basis in the long term, thus highlighting the importance of communication. In other words, an organization changes or learns only indirectly, because it is always people who perceive the discrepancies in the organizational environment they experience and interpret these contradictions in relation to their role there and the interests associated with it. Essentially, this means that organizational learning is inextricably linked to the changes described above, whether these are made by individuals or groups, such as departments or teams within existing organizations (Faulstich 1998, p. 169).

Organizational adaptability to environmental changes, which are represented in the diagram as various weather conditions, is the fundamental prerequisite for the successful development of the key competence of learning ability (Reinhardt 1998, p. 253). As with the environmental influences depicted in the diagram, the organization has no influence on the external changes it faces, whether favorable or less favorable, so that – depending on the respective external circumstances – it is forced to reposition itself and thus initiate the learning processes mentioned above. However, this also means that this involves necessary structural adjustments that must be made by the organization itself, because the subjective will and learning of the people within the organization does not in itself create a changed or new organization (Zech/Ehse 1999, p. 7).

This increase in knowledge, which begins with individuals and must ultimately be transferred to the organization as a whole, leads to a transformation in the level of education of both individuals and the organization itself when the learning process is successful. As shown in the diagram, these development and learning processes enable the organization to adapt to changing environmental conditions, ensuring that the house or organization remains viable and maintains its balance in the future.

The three-level learning model according to Argyris/Schön

According to this model, there are three levels of learning in organizations:

- Single-loop learning
- Double-loop learning
- Deutero learning

Single-loop learning refers to a type of organizational learning that describes efficient error correction in purely rational and cognitive terms as a leadership strategy. The values and norms of the organization are not questioned, which means that only operational actions are taken. The individual responds to a specific situation with an action that they consider appropriate and likely to quickly achieve the desired goal.

In double-loop learning, on the other hand, norms and values are addressed and questioned in the context of the organization. Individual engagement also triggers collective learning processes which, unlike single-loop learning, enable fundamental behavioral change. At this level, therefore, the process goes beyond purely expedient and situational change, so that individuals and the collective are already at a higher level of reflection.

The learning stage of Deutero learning (also known as loop-reflecting learning) is a type of learning in which the learning processes themselves become the subject of learning. The focus here is on learning about learning, and at this level, the extent to which the learning processes from single-loop and double-loop learning were fruitful in terms of their usefulness and efficiency is examined (Moning/Petersen 2010, pp. 172–174).

Leadership and learning processes

In addition to the purely functional significance of leaders as individuals who interact with their employees and ensure that they perform their assigned tasks properly (Naumann 2010, p. 189), leaders also have an educational role to play. This is because the organization in which they are employed as leaders does not determine the tasks of leadership and thus the way in which leaders act, but merely specifies the external framework conditions for this. The leader therefore continues to play a key role in the specific design of leadership. In this context, leaders are the linchpin for learning in organizations, as they can initiate learning processes by providing impetus and thus make a decisive contribution to organizational learning.

It is therefore up to the leader to critically examine the structures and circumstances of the organization and communicate these in an open dialogue. They should not shy away from presenting controversial views. Only when leaders have the courage to resist entrenched structures and act as guides for what they consider to be a more suitable path can change be made possible. As discussed at the outset, such learning processes always begin with individuals, so that leaders can be seen as facilitators in this regard (Naumann 2010, p. 187).

Kühl aptly sums up the importance of change for organizations with his statement: ‘By making change a corporate goal, open internal conflict on the issue is prevented. The postulate of the learning, adaptable organization robs employees of the opportunity to justify being against change per se [...]’ (Kühl 2010, p. 62).

The motto ‘We’ve always done it this way!’ – often used by long-standing members of an organization to justify familiar behavior and antiquated structures – is likely to have become obsolete in modern organizational structures and management teams.

Even if leaders operate as fine-tuners of the system, adapting flexibly to unpredictable situational circumstances, this does not mean that ‘the organizational knowledge base has to be changed every time’. In this respect, they are also assigned a ‘coordination and stabilization function’ (Naumann 2010, p. 187).

Emotions play a major role in all these change processes initiated by leaders. Not only do they serve to strengthen and stabilize social relationships within the organization, they are also a prerequisite for employees to embrace change in the first place (Naumann 2010, p. 187).

In this respect, the overall communicative and psychological dimension of leaders’ actions is of great importance. It is therefore not enough for leaders to be highly capable on a rational level if they are unable to connect with the people they lead on an emotional level. Learning processes can only be successfully implemented if the changes introduced are emotionally anchored.

The personality structure of the respective leader is therefore a decisive factor. In particular, the willingness and ‘ability to engage in critical self-reflection’ are of crucial importance (Naumann 2010, p. 191).

Traditional leadership vs. modern leadership

Work 4.0, virtual and digital leadership, New Work – these are just a few of the terms associated with modern leadership. But what lies behind these modern leadership approaches with their sometimes glamorous-sounding names and, above all, what influence do they have on organisational learning and, consequently, on the way communication and knowledge transfer take place? Before this question can be explored, we must first take a brief detour to the early 20th century.

Max Weber, the founder of the bureaucracy model, had a very clear idea of what constituted good leadership. In his view, this was characterized by clear powers of instruction and control, a top-down hierarchy, fixed tasks and decision-making powers, and the application of objective, impersonal procedures (Althoff/Thielepape 1995, p. 159; Nerdinger 2019, pp. 53–55). It is clear from the characteristics mentioned that their rigidity cannot be reconciled with the modern understanding of leadership.

In the current century, globalization and technological progress are cited as ‘the key challenges for companies’ (Naumann 2010, p. 188). Other examples of the challenges facing companies and public authorities today include demographic change and the knowledge culture (Zukunftsinstitut GmbH 2025a).

In addition, a different self-image with regard to their role as employees and a general change in values can be observed, particularly among today’s younger generation. Individuality, the need for autonomy in performing work tasks, the opportunity to participate in organisational design and a generally flat hierarchy are becoming increasingly important for employees (Naumann 2010, p. 188).

For the design of communication and information processes, the shift towards leadership behavior based on equality means that both the people being led and the leaders make this mutual understanding a mandatory requirement in the context of the respective organization. As a result, leaders are increasingly compelled to ‘fall back on other resources of power and tend to establish a collegial and cooperative relationship with their employees’ (Naumann 2010, p. 191).

Another reason why the understanding of leadership from the age of the bureaucratic model is no longer considered promising is digital progress and the resulting development towards a new future of work, which is also fundamentally changing the nature of leadership: “This means that traditional leadership approaches are being replaced by models based on trust, results and self-organization. Leaders must be able to inspire teams while effectively using technological tools to promote collaboration and communication” (Zukunftsinstitut GmbH 2025b).

In connection with the increased use of digital and hybrid leadership, the former head of department at the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, among others, considers the coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2020 to be a catalyst: ‘The involuntary and unpredictable state of emergency is creating momentum for virtual collaboration, mobile working, home offices, agile forms of organization and new work’ (Borggräfe/Rump 2020, p. 40).

However, the increased use of new media by leaders, i.e. the shift from what was previously exclusively analogue leadership to digital leadership, also requires the creation of the necessary framework conditions ‘to resolve areas of tension between the demands placed on leaders and the reality of the company [...]. Only in this way can leaders seize the potential of the modern working world with the necessary energy and leadership motivation and strengthen their teams in self-organization’ (Bruch/Berenbold/Block 2019, p. 166).

In this respect, it can be said that organizational learning processes are absolutely essential at this point in order to meet the requirements of the digital working world and the challenges associated with it.

A healthy degree of tolerance for mistakes on the part of leaders is also conducive to a positive organizational learning environment: ‘[...] to create a “failure-friendly” learning environment where “failure” itself becomes a source of constructive feedback for the organization [...]’ (Lehnhoff/Kendall 2010, p. 165).

Furthermore, today’s understanding of leadership no longer requires leaders to perform all important tasks themselves. In this respect, experts also confirm that the digital working world 4.0 gives ‘individual employees more freedom, more creative opportunities and more responsibility’ (Gutmann 2021, p. 138).

However, giving employees more freedom, relinquishing control and assigning them high-quality tasks does not mean that leaders can completely dispense with instructions and controls (Dietz/Kracht 2016, p. 73), i.e. this must not lead to a state of anarchy or a lack of leadership.

After all, leaders also serve as role models for the employees they lead. This means that they

should also have the appropriate leadership skills, such as vision and persuasiveness, charisma and, last but not least, a sense of responsibility (Naumann 2010, p. 191).

This makes it clear that not all features of the traditional leadership approach can be discarded, because the basic principles for the role of a leader cited above are essential for stable and successful leadership.

In this respect, it can be said that the positive elements and values of traditional leadership can certainly also be applied in modern leadership approaches. Such successfully implemented leadership strengthens communication and knowledge processes and thus promotes organizational learning: both the people being led and the leader develop a higher level of reflective awareness and are thus prepared to actively participate in organizational thinking and learning processes, each in their own role.

The three-level learning model in the context of leadership

After comparing and examining the two characteristics of leadership approaches, i.e. traditional and modern leadership, these will be linked to the three-level learning model already described below. The aim is to show how these three loops promote organizational learning.

Single-loop learning

As already described, learning processes at the single-loop learning level take place in the sense of reactive adaptation to the respective situation. This means that there is a rapid response to changes in the environment (Seufert 2010, p. 107). As also already discussed, the values and norms of the organization are not questioned here, which is why this level of learning is suitable for operational actions, i.e. rather short-term problem solving (Moning/Petersen 2010, pp. 172–173).

Based on the bureaucratic model already described, such a symptom-oriented correction of errors and adjustments to the respective situation would correspond to the traditional leadership approach. This is because it is essential at the single-loop learning level that the framework conditions are accepted as such and that the associated norms are not questioned (Seufert 2010, p. 107). In this respect, this level corresponds to a strongly authoritarian attitude and the behavior is justified by its traditional nature.

Furthermore, the bureaucratic model and its application are characterized both by the standardization of processes and by clear chains of command (Nerdinger 2019, pp. 53–55). With such authoritarian leadership, it is therefore impossible from the outset to question the resulting framework conditions and thus the organizational structure when a problem or a changed situation suddenly confronts the members of the organization. In other words, at this level of learning, only ‘cosmetic symptoms’ are addressed, because the actual causes, which result, for example, from questionable normative conditions, are not taken into account. This level therefore does not appear to be suitable for problems that need to be solved in the long term or at their root cause, which is why it should be viewed critically if used too frequently and would be a sign that the organization is shying away from addressing and dealing with the actual causes.

Double-loop learning

In contrast to the level described above, the double-loop learning level is one in which norms and values are addressed (Moning/Petersen 2010, p. 173). It is therefore legitimate for individuals at this level to critically examine the circumstances of the organization and to reflect these back to their leaders. It can therefore be said that individuals and their leaders are already at a higher level of reflection. In this respect, this level could be classified as a modern leadership approach. As already explained, leaders and employees are regarded as equal sources of opinion (Moning/Petersen 2010, p. 176). Nevertheless, it should be noted at this point that, despite all the controversial discussions that take place between individuals and also between groups (Seufert 2010, p. 107), the leader is still present and intervenes when the principle of subsidiarity no longer allows these learning processes to be left to run their course (Naumann 2010, pp. 190–191), thus confirming the importance of communication as already described.

Another characteristic of this level of learning is that, unlike single-loop learning, it does not only take place at the individual level, but also incorporates the different abilities and skills of the members of the organisation. This is why it is also referred to as ‘joint learning’ (Moning/Petersen 2010, p. 173).

Deutero learning

This level of learning is the one with the highest level of reflection, as learning itself becomes the subject of learning (Seufert 2010, p. 107).

As with the level of double-loop learning, learning at this level can be attributed to a modern leadership approach. However, the opinion is held here that ‘only the ability of leaders to engage in dialogue can lead to learning processes of this quality’ (Moning/Petersen 2010, p. 175). It can therefore be assumed that this level of learning requires leaders who think holistically and analytically from the outset and that they must also be very sophisticated. This means that leaders analyze and reflect with the people they lead on the extent to which the learning processes from the two previous levels were successful. This also includes an assessment of effectiveness and efficiency. This involves examining what facilitated or inhibited learning (Argyris/Schön 1978; Moning/Petersen 2010, p. 174). At this point, at the latest, it becomes clear that leaders must be honest with themselves and their employees and that weaknesses must be openly addressed, as otherwise no lessons can be learned for future action. In this respect, actions that may have proved unwise or ineffective in retrospect should not be devalued, but rather seen as fruitful insights for the future. Only in this way is it possible ‘[...] for organizations to remain continuously open to learning [...]’ and thus ‘[...] to increase the organization’s ability to learn [...]’ (Seufert 2010, p. 107).

CONCLUSION

In summary, organizational learning is a complex process that manifests itself on three different levels according to the Argyris/Schön model. It should also be noted that the willingness and ability of individuals to learn has a decisive influence on the extent to which such communication and knowledge processes are driven forward. The role and understanding of the leaders are also linked to this, as they can act as a catalyst for organizational learning processes through their leadership style and the corresponding interaction and communication with their employees. The transformation of leadership role does not mean that all characteristics of a traditional understanding of leadership have to be thrown overboard. Rather, it is crucial that modern leadership retains the positive aspects that have always been associated with leadership, such as persuasiveness, charisma and role modelling, and combines them successfully with a progressive leadership role. In this case, the conditions are created for learning processes to be initiated at a high level of reflection among employees and for learning to take place at the second and third levels according to the Argyris/Schön model. Finally, it can be said that successful leadership is measured by the extent to which the leaders succeed in advancing individual and organizational learning with the help of their personality and existing key competencies.

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ОРГАНИЗАЦИОННОТО УЧЕНЕ КАТО ПРОЦЕС НА КОМУНИКАЦИЯ И ПРИДОБИВАНЕ НА ЗНАНИЯ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ НА РОЛЯТА НА ЛИДЕРСТВОТО

Резюме: За организациите е важно да поддържат и насърчават способността и готовността за учене на своите членове. За такива организационни комуникационни и познавателни процеси на ръководителите се отнежда ролята на катализатори. Настоящата статия се основава на литературно проучване на източници от книги, онлайн статии и списания. Първо се разглежда понятието „учене“ в своя общ смисъл, а след това се разглежда връзката между индивидуалното и организационното учене. При това се показват взаимозависимите процеси на знанието, които стоят в основата на тези форми на учене, и се използват познанията от тристепенния модел на учене според Argyris/Schön. Във връзка с това акцентът се поставя върху ролята на лидерството и се разглеждат променящата се представа и разбиране за лидерството във връзка с организационните процеси на учене. При това се разглеждат подробно две диаметрално противоположни концепции за лидерството. Разглежда се въпросът как трансформацията на

ролята на лидерството може да насърчава и оптимизира организационното учене. При това се установява, че съвременната ориентация на лидерството може да се разглежда като особено благоприятна за сложни процеси на учене и придобиване на знание.

Ключови думи: организации; обучение; комуникация; процеси на знанието; лидерство

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