**Organizational Learning from Crocodiles**

***Mastering the basics of sustenance***

**Author**

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14. **Introduction**

*An organization, no matter how well designed, is only as good as the people who live and work in it -* ***Dee Hock***

An organization like every other human being or living organism is born after being conceived in the ideas of the founder. It grows and goes through the various growing pains at various stages, becomes successful or succumbs to failure or death depending on the intellectual growth and capability of adaptation of the members running it in the very environment critical to its existence. What then is the most critical factor determining its survival, growth and success in the harsh business environment? It is nothing but the capability of the organization to learn, manage and exploit its acquired knowledge over the years, and thrive successfully sustaining through bad weathers. Like the predator fearlessly roaming the earth, every organization can fearlessly survive and combat competition successfully if it inculcates the practice of organizational learning amidst the members.

Consider the following situations:

1. Mr. Simpson had been a government contractor for over 15 years now, supplying various hardware components to the department of telecommunication. He also owned an investment business and had the aspiration of setting up a business with the growing market of knowledge outsourcing business, as he had heard that the outsourced business literally was money making machines. With the rapid technological innovations in the telecommunication industry, Mr. Simpson was unable to cater to the demands of his client, and his business started went in doldrums. His investment business was doing well, so he decided to plunge into Knowledge outsourcing business and started an organization with a team of six members on a certain business plan provided by an expert. After a few months, Simpson began to wonder why are things not looking as bright as the business plan reflected, whether the business plan had been built correctly, and if he should consider calling it quits.
2. Saurabh Makhija had started his career as an educationist teaching slum children in his drawing room in the evenings, and then gradually built a huge empire as an Edupreneur both in the urban and the rural areas through his NGO. He left no stones unturned in getting investments for the development of the organizations and the concerned regions in general. He had built a strong team of people who dedicatedly put their effort into the system and walked in the footsteps of their leader. Sadly enough, Mr. Makhija went down with two successive cardiac arrests, and his entire system began to dwindle, the organization gradually going to the dogs. Mr. Makhija decided to retire and leave the once strong organization into the hands of various managers and leaders without bothering with it anymore.
3. Teressa Randall Sampayo works in a growing organization, where she is being respected for her competence, mental agility and ability to initiate change and steer the organization towards stability. Both Derek and Murphy have been eyeing for the position enjoyed by Teressa and have been trying to do all within their limits get their CEO Eric Peterson to question her ability and voice an opinion against her.

It was time for quarterly review of the company’s performance and the performance of the employees in general. Murphy pulled his strings hard to become the blue eyed boy of the CEO, and secure his position in the company’s new overseas venture to China, in which the CEO had previously considered Teressa to be the right fit in the new role of the Overseas Business Advisor. Eric observed all and came up with a new strategy that would get only the most deserving candidate of the three for this role.

What was the most glaring issue in each of the cases that tied a difficult knot at the turning points in the journeys of the individuals and the company? Was there a possibility to avoid the situations?

**[To continue as and when the other chapters begin to flow in sequence]**

**2. Organizational Learning: Definition & Need**

*“The only way that we can live, is if we grow. The only way that we can grow is if we change. The only way that we can change is if we learn. The only way we can learn is if we are exposed. And the only way that we can become exposed is if we throw ourselves out into the open. Do it. Throw yourself.” ― C. JoyBell C.*

The process of creating new knowledge, improving, retaining, and transferring of previous knowledge within an organization for the betterment of the organization is termed as ***organizational learning***.

However, one must be aware of the three consequences of knowledge management.

* Understanding of how to create a perfect organizational learning environment.
* Awareness of why and how something was learned .
* Ensuring that whatever learning takes place, that is useful to the organization.

As an organization gains experience over a span of time, it develops the ability to create new knowledge on a broad basis covering any area that would help enhance its performance in the existing environment. The continuous zest for learning and the processes followed thereby within the organization enhances its overall capability to receive, make sense of, and to respond to the changes happening internally and externally. Organizational learning calls for systematic integration and collective interpretation of the total information and new knowledge held and retrieved by its employees from time to time, and requires collective action that may involve taking of risks in the process of experimentation.

In a world full of challenges, where businesses have to combat a number of regular short term and long term factors weighing down upon their chances of sustainability. organizations have to follow a definite roadmap to meet the important expectations of the 21st century sustainable corporations in terms of governance for sustainability, stakeholder engagement, disclosure, performance in operations, performance in supply chain, performance in transportation and logistics, performance in products and services, and performance in employees. By 2020, organizations need to ensure reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 25%, increase energy efficiency of operations by a minimum of 50%, diminish demand for electricity by 15%, and acquire a minimum of 30% energy from renewable sources.

With the objective of exiting to a clean energy economy accelerating towards an innovative climate change, business organizations are also required to manage the climate risks in their portfolios. To achieve their business goals and objectives abiding by these sustainability criteria amidst increasing competition for excellence, organizations in their individual capacity really have to get over a lot of internal as well as external hurdles that are not conducive to their positive growth potential. Performing under such conditions, organizations frequently realize that they cannot find the requisite skills for their survival amongst their work force, and hence must transform themselves to learning organizations generating the zeal for ‘learning in conjunction or partnership’ using tools and implements provided for organizational development. The key to success lies in creating an environment that promotes on-the - job- learning within the organization.

When people think in unison, it is the social and artifactual things outside the cranium of an individual, that constitute of the source of stimulation and guidance, and are in reality the carriers of thought. The functions, structural composition of these surroundings, arrangements change in the process of learning, and gradually become original parts of the learning, arising out of partnership cognitive learning. And being such, it is not an individual that learns, but a whole organization that learns from the interrelated factors.

Every company or organization at some point in their journey have had to depend on their ability of being a learning organization as their major tactics of survival as change is the only constant in this world. The efforts of an organization in striving to become a learning organization would never go wasted as it confirms and guarantees the survival of products, ideas and jobs for the organization members. A final example of failure in organizational learning is the survival challenges faced presently by the American auto industry. It has not opened itself up to learning from the changes happening in the marketplace or from the stories of success of their non-American competition, which may turn out to be fatal for them. Unless this industry learns to ‘learn’ more efficiently in the future to come, it would have no other option left but to face complete disaster. The predicament faced by the auto industry in the US is a source of great learning for organizations all over the world, as to why continuous learning is critical to survival, and the consequences of it being ignored. Another example of this foreboding spectacle is the missing of the signal by IBM to turn from mainframes to personal computers and Kodak failing to shift its focus from imaging of films to digital photography. IBM has been able to recover the crisis and is able to offer products to the customers that are attractive in the transformed marketplace, but Kodak is yet to recover the shock of this shift in the market, which has jeopardized and put to risk it’s very existence in the market as an independent company.

One major factor responsible for lack of organizational learning is too much reverence towards the existing product which have been successful in the past. Successes obtained in the past, generally tend to blind the organizational leaders, and they tend to ignore the signals of the quantum changes continually happening in the system which is received through the market system.

**Features of a learning organization:** An organization is termed as a learning organization if it displays the following features-

1. It generates systems thinking, which lays out a structure which enables the individual members visualize the bigger picture, interspersing the patterns and interrelationships. It requires a person to look beyond the immediate causes for worries and issues and to look into it as ‘part of a whole system’.
2. It requires individuals in the system to possess personal mastery with the following three components-
* acquiring a personal vision, which reflects the clear vision of the future desired by the individual;
* accepting and using creative tension, where there should be efforts to make reality reach the vision;
* having a commitment towards truth. There should be no self-deception even if it is convenient or comfortable.
1. It requires the leaders and other individual workers to change their mental model, that is the simplified internal structure through which all individuals utilize to understand the world which impacts their behaviour. Fixations of mental model would lead to individual rigidity and the individual would fail to respond to the need of the hour and take in new changes and learning in his or her stride.
2. It requires the members of the organization to have shared vision, leading to a clear definition and expectation of creating or accomplishing something. This is related to the desire of the urge of the members of the organization to create or accomplish something and not simply the objectives of the impersonal organization. The benefits of having a shared vision is that, it inculcates learning and continual pursuit of excellence towards implementation of organizational goals as all would aspire to achieve the common vision.
3. It is required to encourage self - organization, and multiple delicate and complex networks of relationships, which are retained through a proper communication and proper feedback mechanism, incorporating various levels of independence.
4. It is required to include in its learning periphery the broader social ecosystem which includes its customers, competitors, associates, suppliers, legal and government bodies, where each one of these interacting as a whole tend to influence each other in rather a co-evolutionary process.
5. It displays innovation and creativity when braced with a challenge, and is able to create a new order to adapt to a change, though unfortunately, innovation is frequently found to be restrictive.

The external changes in the market system also imbibes new learning in the organization and impacts it internal environment, thus changing the organizational culture as well for better adaptability. The continuous demand for excellence forces the organization to promote the concept of learning within the institutions through its people, and become the incubators and creators of intellects that contribute towards the creation of knowledge that will support the new opportunities available in the market or in facing new challenges that crop up in a changed environment.

**3. What can we learn from crocodiles–the traits for survival and sustenance**

*“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.”
― Albert Einstein*

One of the most outstanding and fascinating human characteristics is the ability to learn. It is a continuous process and often it is the involuntary accumulation of knowledge and information. The learning process can be a purposeful endeavour or a result of multifaceted life experiences. Through the learning process one acquires skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Over the years psychologists and educators have researched on the learning process and how an individual learns. The two basic approaches are **behaviourism and the cognitive theories**. An individual learns either by cognitive theories or behaviourism or a combination of both. According to behaviourists, human and animals learn in almost the same way. When a particular form of behaviour is reinforced or repeated, under the guidance of an expert, leaning takes place. Learning, in course of time, brings about change in behaviour and shapes the cognitive abilities of the learner.

Recent psychologists stress more on the cognitive theory of learning. While behaviourism focuses more on the behavioural aspects of the students, the cognitive theory focuses more on the mind of the learner. The two most important branches of cognitive theory are the information processing model and the social interaction model. According to the first, the student's brain is structurally conditioned to select, process, store and retrieve incoming material and information. The information thus processed produces internal and external responses. Both models of the cognitive theory are based on common principles. Both the theories acknowledge the importance of reinforcing behaviour and measuring the outcomes. Reinforcement is of importance, especially with cognitive concepts such as knowledge and understanding.

On the other hand, social interaction theories stress that learning and resulting changes in behaviour take place as a result of interaction between the student and the environment. Environment, to a great extent, moulds the behaviour of the learner. Some of the significant factors are influences of culture, peer expectations, group behaviour and modes of entertainment. Therefore, the social environment to which the student belongs influences and moulds his, learning outcomes. The learner cognitively absorbs the observed behaviours and consequences. Learning is a synergy of verbal instruction, behaviour and environmental events. Finally comes the need to evaluate because that is the only way to get a clue about whether the learning objectives have been met. Paper-and-pencil exam or a performance test is a way of evaluating the outcome although psychologists agree that often there are errors in evaluation. In fact, the combination of both the behaviouristic and the cognitive approaches contribute in learning outcomes. Both the theories provide a way to measure behavioural outcomes and enhance cognitive learning. The combined approach is not simple and often learning is not a conscious or tangible process. Life experiences, surrounding environment, and adaptation techniques –all play an important role in the learning outcome.

The very fact that learning depends both on the cognitive and environmental surroundings shows how important surroundings and the consequent challenges thrown by the surroundings are for the process of learning. Learning happens simultaneously from the cognitive approaches as well as the environment in which the learners live and interact. Hence the emphasis is often on immediate environment of the learner.  All learning takes place in the influence of physical environment where the physical elements are tangible and perceptible by the senses. Students are engrossed in the environment in which they learn. For example, the learning environment will be different and the learning experience will be different when the students learn in a large lecture hall or under the shade of a large banyan tree. The assimilated information will also be different. Specific elements within the environment influence the student’s learning process and draw the learner’s attention. The learner continuously internalise the stimuli that they receive from the environment. Things like the armchairs, light arrangements, the smell of the coffee or the soothing breeze, all can influence the learning outcome. The sights and sounds of instruction too is an integral part of learning. . Moreover, the learning process is an active engagement of the learners with the surroundings. They process select information and often discard ones that are not appealing. Sometimes the learning space becomes a place of emotional connect. By piecing together bits of information, and applying those with existing thoughts and preconceptions, the learning process continues.

What is evident from this discussion is that the surrounding environment and the challenges it throws at the learner plays an important part in the learning process. Hence to explore whether the survival of crocodiles is in any way related to the learning process one has to study in great detail the life cycle of the crocodile.

**Basic Facts about crocodiles:** Crocodiles (Crocodylus acutus) have tough, scaly skin. They are grey-green or olive-green with long, slim snouts, which differentiates them from the alligator. Theyinhabit brackish and saltwater habitats and are generally found in coastal mangrove wetlands, ponds, coves, creeks and canals**.** The Nile and Australian crocodiles are infamous for aggression.In April or May, the female crocodile builds a nest made of dry dirt in a mound of mud near the water’s edge. The mother crocodile buries the eggs and closely guards her nest. After the eggs hatch, the mother crocodile helps carry her young to the water. However, unlike the alligator, she does not continue to care for her young. The female crocodiles lay about 9 to 90 eggs and bury them in the sand. When the baby crocodiles chirp before hatching, the mother crocodile digs them out of the sand. The baby crocodiles are carried to the water and supervision by mother crocodile is minimum so almost 99% of the newly hatched crocodiles die in the first year itself because large fish, lizards, birds and adult crocodiles eat them.

 Before exploring further into the life cycle of a crocodile, it would be worthwhile to take a cue from the lessons that might be learnt from the early life of the crocodiles. According to the theory of behavioural learning, external challenges help in honing the survival instincts of a learner. Even in cognitive theory tests and evaluation that quantify learning, are based on challenges. Challenges in the surrounding environment enhance the survival instinct of an individual. Behaviourism is more relevant with behaviour than with cognizant or knowing. It concentrates on the tangible and observable elements of behaviour. The stimulus-response mechanisms of the baby crocodiles are honed early in life and hence they are well prepared to face the challenges of their immediate environment. The mother crocodile does not supervise the baby crocodiles and hence they become more adaptive to the surroundings. Though almost 90% of the new born crocodiles perish, the ones who survive are well equipped to face the challenges.

##### Every firm has a set of instructions about the way employees should deal in order to carry out their jobs and solve problems. However, these instructions are often specific and limited in focus, limiting the individual to a set plan. In real situations these set plans are often considered obsolete and redundant. This is when the lessons learnt from challenges and environment come to the rescue of an individual. The baby crocodiles are equipped with these lessons early in life, which help them in later life to survive

In most of the situations, individuals rarely follow espoused theory and they rely on interaction and past experiences to solve a problem. Individuals of an organisation solve problems and learn from experience. Often, such problem solving can take place in an undefined and unstructured way. So, how does an individual take decisions in an organizational set-up? The problem can be solved only when it does not overwhelm an individual. Previous challenges and life –lessons act as a frame of reference. It is obvious that the baby crocodiles will be better equipped to face the challenges posed by the surrounding environment. Most of the times organizational behaviour is routine-based, experience dependent, and target driven. While lessons from the past are stored in the organizational memory, the specific event itself is often lost. It is obvious, being exposed to survival challenges so early in life, crocodiles have a repertoire of problems and also their solutions stored in their memory.

 Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore the life cycle of a crocodile to find valuable lessons for organizational learning. Organizational learning often does not depend on preconceived theory; it depends on spontaneous and on the spot problem solving skills. The crocodiles’ early life teaches it important lessons for survival.

**Resources:**

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/d/dee_hock.html#usBprybSaIGgQejW.99>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organizational_learning>

<http://www.solonline.org/?page=Abt_OrgLearning>

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/organizational-learning.html> http://www.ceres.org/issues/clean-trillion/clean-trillion?gclid=CKS40tejn8oCFdIWaAod5PQNQA

<http://www.knowledge-management-tools.net/organizational-learning.html>

<http://infed.org/mobi/learning-in-organizations-theory-and-practice/>

<http://www.ceres.org/roadmap-assessment/landing>

<http://www.ceres.org/issues/clean-trillion/clean-trillion?gclid=CKS40tejn8oCFdIWaAod5PQNQA>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2012/01/18/5-keys-to-building-a-learning-organization/>

<http://gemi.org/metricsnavigator/eag/What%20are%20the%20Characteristics%20of%20a%20Learning%20Organization.pdf>