

**ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY & LEARNING:
UNCOVERING SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL
LEARNING**

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to expand the field's thinking beyond notions of organizational learning rooted in individual-level conceptualizations (i.e., behavior-based, performance-based, knowledge-based learning), we provide a theoretical argument for a form of learning unique to the collective level, which we term "meaning-based learning." Meaning-based learning involves changes in the intersubjective meanings (not just the language and labels) used by the members of a collective in their daily interactions. Because this form of learning involves (often tacit) changes to intersubjective meanings -- a supra-individual concept -- the members of the collective might or might not explicitly articulate, or even be aware of, this form of learning as it occurs. Using the relationship between organizational identity and organizational learning as a springboard, we examine the nature of this collective form of learning and discuss its implications for future research on organizational learning.

Although we have come to the organizational learning game a bit late, we feel that our tardiness affords us a unique perspective on the nature of organizational learning and how scholars conceptualize it in their research. Specifically, we believe that the general term “organizational learning” has become so broad and that it now subsumes so many varied concepts that its usefulness as a concept has become limited in both research and practice. Based on our own research experiences and a thorough review of the organizational learning literature, we feel that a more effective approach is for theorists and researchers to recognize and define multiple types of organizational learning, each differing in its structure and process and each fulfilling different functions within an organization. We believe that it is in our best interests as researchers, and in the best interests of the organizations we study and consult with, to be more specific about the particular type(s) of organizational learning to which we are referring when we use this term.

In reviewing current conceptualizations of organizational learning, we have identified three preferred perspectives on the nature of organizational learning that emerge from the various definitions of the notion: (1) that learning is based in behavior change (routine-based learning); (2) that learning is based in the correction of errors (performance-based learning); and (3) that learning is based in changes to knowledge structures (schema/script-based learning). These three types of learning are all rooted in theory and have varied levels of empirical support demonstrating their existence and importance to organizational behavior. Unfortunately, current treatments of organizational learning do not do an adequate job of specifying which type of learning is of interest to the researchers, or even of differentiating among them.

We propose to jump start this process of identifying specific types of learning by highlighting and explicating one particular type of organizational learning, *meaning-based learning* – a subtle form of organizational learning arising from changes in intersubjective meaning – and demonstrating how it differs from other forms of organizational learning described in the current literature. We believe that meaning-based learning is a particularly important aspect of organizational life, yet one that has been neglected in previous conceptualizations of organizational learning. We approach this specification through a discussion of how this form of organizational learning arose in our current research on organizational identity change and why its articulation helps advance our understanding of the concept of organizational learning.

1. IDENTITY CHANGE AS ENTRÉE INTO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Our entry portal into the learning domain, and the foundation for this paper, is our research on organizational identity change. The past few years have seen us focused on the problem of how organizational identity can be malleable enough to allow organizations the necessary adaptability to deal with turbulent environments, yet stable enough to maintain the sense of continuity necessary for long-term survival and growth. Briefly, *organizational identity* involves perceptions shared by organization members about who they are as an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, 1998; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Issues of organizational identity change arise not only as an organization attempts to answer the question “Who are we?” but also the question of “Who should we be?” Attempting to answer these questions usually prompts the question “Who do others

think we are?,” which means that identity is closely interrelated with *construed external image* and *reputation* (which represent, respectively, how insiders think outsiders perceive the organization (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) and how outsiders actually perceive the organization (Fombrun, 1996)).

Researchers have argued that because organizational identity involves answers to such fundamental questions, it is inherently stable and resistant to change. However, our research has demonstrated that this is not the case and that, quite to the contrary, organizational identity can change over relatively short periods of time (Corley, Gioia, & Fabbri, 2000; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The underlying means by which identity change is possible while appearing to have endurance or continuity is that organization members maintain consistent labels for elements of their identity over time, but the meanings associated with these labels change to accommodate current needs. One upshot of these theoretical and empirical efforts is the realization that processes of organizational learning are essential to the social construction and reconstruction of organizational identity in the now-common context of a fast-changing environment. In a general sense, identity construction and reconstruction are intertwined with a continuous process of organizational learning because the organization must continuously relearn its identity as its enacted environment recursively influences further action taking.

However, as our research has progressed, we have slowly recognized that the type of learning involved in this dynamic process differs from the organizational learning most often described in management research. The learning associated with organizational identity change tends to be more subtle and based in changes to intersubjective and cultural meanings as compared to the overt, knowledge and behavior based changes associated with the individual-level origins of learning research (Huber, 1991; Miller, 1996). This emerging distinction has forced us to explore more deeply the relationship between identity and learning, and, as a result, to scrutinize organizational learning as a theoretical concept.

We are not the first to note a relationship between learning and identity. A recent trend in scholarly work has been the conceptualization of organizational learning in a situated context where the development and use of organizational knowledge is located in interactions among actors sharing a common identity in a community of practice (Lant, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1997). One outcome of this trend is a seemingly inconsistent relationship between identity and learning. At the organizational level, this inconsistency reveals itself in the juxtaposition of the following two statements (both paraphrased from research on the situated nature of organizational learning): “organizational identity is dependent on processes of organizational learning” and “processes of organizational learning are dependent on organizational identity.”

Current treatments of this relationship tend to reduce it to its inhibiting aspects by noting the constraints placed on identity and learning because of their interdependence. For instance, Brown and Starkey (2000: 102) argue from a psychodynamic perspective that “individuals and organizations are not primarily motivated to learn to the extent that learning entails anxiety-provoking identity change.” They explain that “in practice, this means that individuals and organizations engage in learning activities and employ information and knowledge conservatively to preserve their existing identities.” Thus, they imply that both identity change and learning are constrained because of their mutual

dependence on each other. Likewise, Weick and Ashford (2001: 711) suggest that “individuals learning about their own performance or that of their organization often make trade-offs between the desire for accurate information and the desire to defend the ego” and Lant (1999: 185) explains that because identity “describes the boundaries of the collective [it] influences the interpretations of member firms and tends to constrain the range of strategic actions taken...both interpretation and actions will tend toward congruence with this identity.”

These perspectives on the identity-learning relationship, however, hinge on the assumption that organizational identity is stable and, therefore, changes in organizational identity can be disconcerting for an organization and anxiety-producing for its members. As our work on identity change has demonstrated, though, this conceptualization provides a rather incomplete picture of organizational identity, and in fact, prevents researchers from seeing complexities involved in its relationship with other key organizational phenomena. No where is this more evident than in the relationship between organizational identity and organizational learning.

Based on a continuing line of research into the relationship between organizational identity change and organizational learning, we suggest that instead of focusing on the potential for constraints to arise from their mutual dependence (which inhibit adaptability), it is insightful to look at the enabling effects provided through their interrelationship (which facilitate adaptability). Viewing organizational identity and learning as mutually enabling provides the necessary reorientation to examine forms of organizational learning that differ from the more traditional conceptions of it as exclusively a conscious, knowledge- and behavior-based process.

2. THE NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

As we noted above, current work on organizational learning seems focused on three main types of learning, (1) routine-based learning, (2) performance-based learning, and (3) knowledge-based learning. All three of these forms of organizational learning provide valuable insight into understanding how collectives learn and use their learning to adapt to changes in the environment. All three also have their origins in research on individual learning, however, and tend to treat organizational learning either as an aggregation of individual learning inside an organization (see e.g., Dodgson, 1993; Miller, 1996; Simon, 1991) or as a collective process that functions similar to learning at the individual level (see e.g., Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991).

Our perspective on organizational learning is different, however. Similar to our arguments that organizational identity is more than just a collective version of individual identity (Corley et al., 2000), we believe that some types of organizational learning are more than just a collective version of individual learning. Weick (1991) clearly articulates the strength of this position in his assertion that depicting organizational learning as following the same processes as individual learning limits our ability to gain insight into the phenomenon as a distinctive process in its own right. In its essence, Weick's argument contends that individual-level psychological theories of learning do not adequately describe the organizational learning process because the assumptions underlying those theories do

not hold for organizations - organizations are a different type of entity than humans and interact with environments differently than humans. To depict organizations as learning the same way that humans do results in an overly human-centric view that does not do justice to the unique nature of organizational learning.

Weick and Westley (1999) further support this perspective in their citing of Normann's (1985) and Argote and McGrath's (1993) work. These researchers embed organizational learning in the practices and structures of groups rather than in the cognitions of individuals. Learning does not become a macro concept because groups (or in our case organizations) have cognitive structures like humans. Rather, it becomes a macro concept because learning is embedded in behavior and social interaction; in becoming a macro concept, these researchers argue that learning must transcend individual cognition.

Finally, our view of organizational learning is informed by Cook and Yanow's (1993) conceptualization of organizational learning as a cultural process. Attempting to circumvent the problems they see with viewing organizations as cognitive entities, Cook and Yanow examined the Powell Flute Company's encounter with a technological change as an instance of organizational learning that occurred without the impetus of a performance gap, but rather involved implicitly understood meanings. What emerges from their analysis is a depiction of organizational learning as "the acquiring, sustaining, or changing of intersubjective meanings through the artifactual vehicles of their expression and transmission and the collective actions of the group" (p. 384).

The crucial insight here is that organizational learning often involves "intersubjective meanings" created and sustained via cultural interaction. Similar to Weick and Robert's (1993) notion of collective mind embedded in group interaction, learning becomes collective when it is conceived of at the level of social interaction and involves shared meaning, not just knowledge. Cultural artifacts such as language, symbols, and rituals (all supra-individual notions) facilitate the expression and transmission of shared understanding of actions and events across the organization.

3. MEANING-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

As Weick (1991) points out, conceptualizing organizational learning at a bona fide collective level opens up the possibility of seeing previously hidden or neglected aspects of the phenomenon that differ from learning at the individual level. One such aspect, and an important part of understanding the adaptive nature of the identity-learning relationship, involves the subtle nature of meaning-based organizational learning. Meaning-based organizational learning involves changes to the intersubjective meanings underlying the labels and actions constituting the core of a collective's culture. Instead of thinking of organizational learning as only involving changes in behavior or knowledge, this perspective acknowledges that adaptive changes in meaning also form a viable conceptualization of organizational learning. Furthermore, by moving the locus of the learning process away from an emphasis on individual cognitions and placing its emphasis on the social interactions and intersubjective meanings embedded within a collective, it is

possible to conceive of organizational learning as taking place without explicit awareness, intent or recognition of such by the members of the collective.

It is possible for organizational learning to occur without overt acknowledgement from the collective because changes in intersubjective meanings can exist and impact future cognition and behavior without members of the collective recognizing them. If a socially shared sense of meaning changes among the members of a collective, no one member of the collective need articulate that change to the other members for it to be implemented. It can be more subtle because learning and meaning can exist independently of the individual, in the interactions of the collective. Thus, simply by acting differently and picking up subtle cues based on others' behaviors, it is possible for meanings to change even without linguistic interaction. Taking this argument even further, we can say that, at the extreme, changes in intersubjective meanings might be so subtle that not only are they not articulated and made explicit in the collective's interactions, but that they also remain at a tacit level for the individuals within the collective.

A clear example of this process involves the shifting meaning of what it is to be a team for the members of a software development group. As the individuals come together and begin interacting with one another, a shared sense emerges that they are a team because their interactions are based in a consensus-seeking, decision making process where everyone participates equally to achieve the collective's goals. Over time, however, as resource and time constraints arise, the interaction patterns of these individuals change such that each member takes on more autonomy, preferred task partnerships emerge, and important decisions are made individually, all the while, accounting for the other members of the team and their shared goals. Even though the members of the collective may not be aware of the change or, if they are, do not articulate it in their verbal interactions, the meaning of what it is to be a team has changed for them. Not only have their individual and shared behaviors adapted to meet environmental constraints, but the meaning underlying their declaration of themselves as a "team" has shifted, even though they continue to use the same label.

Learning has occurred within the collective, even though they might never label it as such, or, if they do, it will not be labeled until an occasion for retrospective sensemaking occurs or until external feedback raises their awareness of the change. Once it is brought to the collective's attention, it can officially be labeled "learning" by those involved (Nicolini & Mezner, 1995) and become explicit in their actions and future meaning making efforts. Nevertheless, awareness and articulation of the change in intersubjective meaning need not occur for organizational learning to take place.

3.1 The Fluidity of Organizational Identity

A more complete example of meaning-based organizational learning, and one grounded in actual data, derives from the process of organizational identity change. Because organizational identity consists of collectively shared beliefs and perceptions of what it means to be 'us' as an organization, any change in that collective sense necessarily involve changes in intersubjective meanings. Yet, those changes are not always recognized by the members nor explicitly labeled as learning if recognized. Exploring why

organizational identity changes and how this process comes about not only helps illustrate the adaptive nature of the identity-learning relationship, it also provides a clear example of meaning-based organizational learning.

Because current conceptions of the relationship between organizational learning and organizational identity are based on the assumption that organizational identity is stable, it is first necessary to explain why and how identity can be malleable before exploring alternative perspectives on their relationship. Our original conceptualization of a malleable identity grew out of past research on organizational identity, image, and reputation that demonstrated the potential for identity to change over time, but did not explicitly acknowledge or explain it (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). In exploring these examples, we posited that images of the organization communicated by outsiders are noticed by organization members and spur a social comparison process similar to James' (1918) "looking glass self" (Gioia et al., 2000).

Specifically, members of an organization (especially top management team members) implicitly and explicitly assess how they see the organization (i.e., provide answers to such questions as "Who do we think we are?" and "Who do we think we should be?") in relation to how they think outsiders see it (i.e., provide answers to questions such as "Who do they think we are?" and "Who do they think we should be?"). Arising from this comparison is either a sense of discrepancy ("how we see ourselves does not match with how we think others see us") or a sense of alignment ("we see ourselves in a similar way to how we think they see us") (Corley et al., 2000). Alignment feeds back to reinforce organizational identity, whereas discrepancy can either result in a sense that something must be done in response to the disparity or in an acceptance of the discrepancy if it falls within some "zone of indifference" (Barnard, 1938).

Regardless of whether a sense of alignment or discrepancy arises, identity is reconsidered and reconstructed (and thus destabilized to some degree) as organization members confront the knowledge and implications of others' views of the organization. This instability of identity is actually adaptive, we argued, in that it allows an organization to cope better with the demands of an environment that itself is undergoing continuous change. That is, an organizational identity that adapts to changing perceptions while maintaining a sense of continuity affords an organization the ability to cope with the changing expectations realized in interactions with a changing environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Perhaps the most useful aspect of our revised conceptualization of organizational identity, and the key to understanding its linkage with meaning-based organizational learning, was the recognition that changes in organizational identity can occur at the level of shared meanings, not just common language. That is, an organization's identity consists of (1) the shared labels used to describe the "sense of self" among the members of the organization and with others, and (2) the meanings associated with those labels. The seeming stability of an organization's identity resides in the stability of the consistent labels used to describe it, whereas the meanings associated with those labels often change over time to match external expectations and internal goals. Thus, an organization can claim a stable identity, for instance, as a service organization focused on "delivering the highest possible quality," but the significance of such words as "service," "quality," and "highest

possible” can (and, in some circumstances, must) take on different meanings at different times for members of the organization. This feature of organizational identity allows for a comforting sense of consensus and continuity for interested parties both inside and outside the organization.

Changes in the meanings underlying identity is as much a process of organizational learning as a pronounced change to the descriptive labels would be. The biggest difference, and the reason why the relationship between identity and learning can be adaptive, is that the learning can take place below the level of articulation, and possibly even awareness, for the individuals within the collective. Organizational learning occurs subtly as members focus on the labels used to describe ‘who we are’ while the more tacit and unexplored meanings underlying the labels change to match the shifting environment. This tacit process allows for a sense of continuity and stability in times of change, while affording the organization the necessary adaptive learning to survive and grow in the face of changing environments. Thus, it is possible for learning to take place in the face of anxiety about changing identity because the identity change (and thus organizational learning) occurs at the level of intersubjective meanings embedded in social interaction.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Conceiving of organizational learning as occurring subtly, at a tacit level of collective awareness and articulation, affords researchers an opportunity to gain deeper insight into organizational phenomena. Perhaps the most germane insight afforded by our approach is the reorientation required when looking at the interrelationship between identity and learning. Contrary to most current treatments of this relationship, we do not believe that concerns about identity change inhibit organizational learning, nor that organizational learning most often facilitates the maintenance of organizational identity. In articulating a type of organizational learning that occurs at the level of intersubjective meanings, we have been forced to consider the adaptive aspects of this relationship and recognize the ways that learning facilitates identity change and identity change facilitates organizational learning.

Meaning-based learning occurs in organizational processes other than organizational identity change, however, including the planning and implementing of strategic change initiatives, the sensemaking and sensegiving efforts associated with leadership, the development, growth, and intra-action of teams, and even the day-to-day functioning of an organization’s culture. One particularly promising perspective that emerges from considering meaning-based organizational learning concerns the role of leadership in an organization and, especially, the process of transforming an organization into a learning organization. If learning does occur at the level of intersubjective meanings, and thus is subtle enough that it often is not noticed or articulated within an organization, then one important aspect of leadership is the act of noticing (or instigating) and articulating changes in intersubjective meanings. This noticing and articulation process can heighten the awareness among the organization’s members that adaptive change is occurring and afford them the opportunity to capture and codify it for future use. As this facet of leadership develops and progresses, meaning-based learning can become the basis for cultural change around learning processes and help the organization become one “which

facilitates the learning of all of its members and continually transforms itself” (Pedler, Boydell, & Burgoyne, 1989: 2) and that is “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin, 1993: 80).

Most importantly, however, by acknowledging the existence of a distinctive, meaning-based form of organizational learning, it becomes imperative that future work in this area be more specific in reference to the type of learning under examination. Although some might argue that specification of another form of organizational learning leads to fragmentation of the concept, we feel that the inclusion of meaning-based learning within the spectrum of organizational learning types is a promising way for researchers to gain genuine insight into organizational phenomena related to organizational learning and to help the organizations they work with improve their learning processes.

5. CONCLUSION

Acknowledging and specifying multiple types of organizational learning provides the wherewithal to conceive of theoretical possibilities constrained by the current definitional boundaries of the term. We have provided one example of these possibilities in our illustration of consensual meaning-based learning, a type of organizational learning that: (1) is found only at a collective level; (2) is more subtle and tacit than previously conceived types of organizational learning; and (3) provides insight into alternative relationships between organizational phenomena (such as our example of the adaptive nature of the learning-identity relationship). We believe that as researchers become more specific about the type of organizational learning they are describing and/or studying that our understanding of the role learning plays in organizational behavior and strategy will improve, thus enabling us as researchers to provide valuable knowledge for the organizations we study.

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