ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Learning to Add Value:
Fostering Cultures of Effective Learning
in the Australian Army

Steven Talbot

ABSTRACT

Organisations remain relevant and competitive through their ability to harness and deploy knowledge in order to promote future success through adaptation. To this end, an organisation's capacity to generate cultures which promote learning at individual, team and organisational levels is paramount. This article examines the significance of culture, and in particular, the role of learning cultures in the Australian Army as vehicles for individual and organisational development. In doing so, this article considers why it is important for the Australian Army to have effective learning cultures, how some learning practices can be viewed as more relevant or useful than others, and who is required to do the learning. The article concludes by emphasising the value of developing learning cultures in which learners learn useful things, and in turn, learning is made useful through organisational application. In this sense, we can regard learning as a process which holds much of value for Army.
Introduction: A few words on culture

Unless you have been living in a cave for the last few years it would impossible to miss the significance of culture and its prominence within discursive frameworks operating in Defence. As a sociologist who has been examining the significance of learning in the Australian Army for almost a decade now, I find the current focus on culture both fascinating and frustrating. It is fascinating in the sense that culture provides a powerful lens for examining organisational identity and practice. And it is frustrating in the sense that certain practices and behaviours seem to reappear in spite of well-meaning efforts to reduce their occurrence.

A significant contribution to the current cultural discourse is made by Pathway to Change, a strategy for promoting cultural change and reform produced in response to a series of culture and internal reviews across Defence. This discourse on culture, more often than not, tends to ‘problematise’ culture, or more significantly, representations of particular aspects of a Defence culture which are thought to be responsible for a variety of institutional transgressions requiring some form of intervention. Putting arguments relating to causation aside, the effect of these representations creates a perception of a Defence culture which needs to be ‘fixed’. I use the word ‘a’ very deliberately because, when culture is spoken of in this context, it usually draws on a singular view of culture. This homogeneous view of culture has the unfortunate effect of tarnishing the entire Defence Organisation including admirable facets of organisational culture such as mateship, professionalism and esprit de corps, which are surely worth preserving. Such a view ignores the extent to which the Australian Defence Force, and in particular its three services, comprise culture(s) — plural.

Ironically, with all this emphasis on culture, whether through references to ‘fixing’, ‘changing’, or growing the ‘right’ sort of Defence culture, there appears to be a reluctance to define the term itself.¹ This of course begs the question: if the organisation cannot define culture, how can it expect to ‘fix’ it, or have any meaningful way of determining whether or not it is growing the ‘right’ sort of culture? Here the social sciences offer a way ahead. Sociologists and anthropologists, for example, draw distinctions between material and non-material culture. Material culture comprises artefacts and objects such as ships, tanks and the ‘Bunny Ears’ in Russell, Canberra. Non-material culture is more concerned with ideas: ideas about the way the world is (knowledge); accompanying ideas or preferences about the way things ought to be (values); and the translation of values
into rules and expectations which express how things should be done (norms). While the exact wording is not important, any definition should incorporate these aspects of material and non-material culture.

While it is possible to explore the relationship between material and non-material culture and learning, this article confines its discussion to non-material culture. In particular, this discussion ponders the merits of Army adopting a more learner-centric view in order to increase its organisational agility and adaptive capacity. In doing so, it considers the extent to which Army's adaptive capacity can be enhanced through the generation of learning cultures which promote knowledge creation and sharing, in which leaders value and promote learning so that learning becomes an everyday feature of individual and organisational practice.

**Why does Army need a learning culture?**

The Australian Army needs to cultivate effective learning cultures in order to better realise its modernisation and strategic planning efforts; successfully manage and influence change; make informed decisions concerning capability development; maintain reputation and societal support; foster creative and critical thinking among personnel across the organisation; and, most significantly, save lives.

The idea of learning in and by organisations is a focus of learning organisation proponents. A multitude of definitions exists for the learning organisation, each with its own particular focus. Some authors describe the learning organisation in an aspirational manner making reference to a desired state of being or guiding philosophy for change initiatives. Some liken the process of becoming a learning organisation to an ongoing quest, while others use the term to describe a type of organisation. The result of this proliferation of definitions is a degree of confusion over the term. For the most part, however, the learning organisation is depicted as a ‘systems level’ concept within the literature.

Evidence of ‘systemic health’ can be discerned through the presence of the following factors:

- a clear sense of identity, purpose or mission
- a capacity on the part of the system to adapt and maintain itself in the face of internal and external changes
- a capacity to perceive and test reality
- some degree of internal integration or alignment of the sub-systems that make up the whole system
These four factors, Schein argues, provide a prerequisite for learning, or the ‘basic capacity to learn’.6

Within learning organisations, successful adaptation to change and uncertainty is believed to occur through the learning efforts (both planned and incidental) of individuals and the organisation as a whole. To this end, learning organisations foster cultural conditions which promote and support learning. That is, they have cultures in place which:

- view learning as playing a vital role in informing organisational self-awareness, facilitated through storing, capturing, and sharing new insights with organisational members (knowledge)
- acknowledge and communicate the importance of learning for achieving individual and organisational outcomes (values)
- are characterised by leaders demonstrating their own commitment to learning, encouraging personnel to do the same (norms)

Indeed, learning processes within organisations are tied to culture. Culture helps determine what constitutes knowledge, and which kinds of knowledge can and should be managed. Consequently, culture informs the ways in which new knowledge is created, legitimated, transferred or hoarded within organisations.7 Within many organisations, however, considerable energy and attention is often devoted to information technologies for solving knowledge-management and knowledge-sharing problems. Unfortunately, these technology-driven systems are frequently implemented without consideration for the actual way in which people acquire, share and use information.8 In such instances, an organisation’s capacity to learn is hampered by its failure to align individual, social and technical aspects of learning with their cultural underpinnings.

The Adaptive Army initiative acknowledges the important role learning plays in assisting the Australian Army to remain agile and responsive in order to meet its operational challenges and strategic goals.9 In 2009, the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Gillespie, described the Adaptive Army as aspiring ‘to be a true Learning Organisation where shared, timely knowledge and flexible learning are accepted as the norm for individuals, teams and the organisation.’10 The learning organisation depicted here connotes both a technical and a social view of learning. The technical aspects of learning incorporate such things as technology-driven architectures designed to provide the flexible delivery of learning, as well as technologies which support the storing and dissemination of information.
The social aspects of learning include informal means of generating and sharing information (knowledge), as well as cultural expectations (norms) for knowledge-sharing and learning which attempt to 'standardise' behaviour.

Whether or not Army (or any other organisation for that matter) can be a 'true' learning organisation is an interesting question. Learning organisations are often characterised as having relatively flat and decentralised organisational structures which empower employees to make decisions with reduced managerial constraints. This (a)structural characteristic is presented as being antithetic to rigidly hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations in which strategic knowledge remains in a few heads 'at the top', and power flows down from the top to the bottom. The assumption here of course is that bureaucracies are places devoid of creativity and learning, and that learning organisations are devoid of structure, routine, and constraints on practice. Both positions are untenable and unhelpful in generating sustainable cultures of learning. Army does not need to undergo a total restructure to become a learning organisation. Having sound organisational structures in place, after all, allows organisations to function and maintain order. The learning nub for Army, in this respect, relates to the incorporation of sufficient flexibility within existing organisational structures so that continuity can co-exist alongside change, and requirements for routine, obedience and order do not come at the expense of creativity and innovation. Moreover, Army needs to have mechanisms and metrics in place to track the extent to which learning is applied to produce desirable outcomes, whether they are changes in individual behaviour, processes, or the creation of learning cultures amenable to adaptation.

What sort of learning, and what is being learned?

When considering the question of why it is important that the Australian Army has effective learning cultures so as to become more organisationally agile and adaptive, it is also worth asking what sort of learning is required and, more to the point, what should be learned.

The learning organisation literature is awash with numerous examples of favourable learning approaches believed to improve individual and organisational performance. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge provides a list of five inter-related component technologies or disciplines required to establish a learning organisation. These disciplines include personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Systems thinking is the cornerstone of Senge's learning organisation and, in its simplest sense, is the ability to see the big picture. It is a conceptual framework which encourages people to see the relationships between many parts, and identify processes rather than focus on linear cause-and-effect relationships.
For Senge, these five inter-related disciplines promote generative learning within and across an organisation. Other well-known learning approaches noted in the literature include single and double loop learning,\textsuperscript{14} continuous learning,\textsuperscript{15} action learning — learning to solve problems,\textsuperscript{16} and learning resulting in the generation of new knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} The language used to describe these types of learning, however, is often unhelpful, requiring patience and perseverance from readers as they navigate through a sea of overly prescriptive motherhood statements and management speak.

Pedler and Aspinwall offer some clarity on the matter through their four categories of learning which they consider indicative of learning organisations. Simply expressed, these four categories include learning about things, learning to do things, learning to become yourself, and learning to achieve things with others.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Learning about things:} We are probably most familiar with this kind of learning which is concerned with knowledge generation and transfer. Commonly, this involves the learner sitting in a classroom, whether in a university or Army training facility, learning the specifics of a particular subject matter. Often this type of learning relies heavily on the presentation of material, requiring the recipient to memorise chunks of (often decontextualised) information. This teacher-centric stance to learning posits the learner as a passive recipient of information. If done poorly, this approach not only has the potential to alienate soldiers from learning, but also presents learning as a chore, yet another undertaking for busy people to cram into their already hectic working lives.

\textit{Learning to do things:} A complementary extension to the notion of learning about things is learning to do things. This type of learning involves the development of skills, abilities and the competencies of learners. There are many examples of how Army fosters this approach to learning through its regime of competency-based training programs and exercises as well as operational deployments. Learning to do, and its partner, learning by doing, place the learner in a more active role, providing more immediate learning outcomes, as they allow cause and effect relationships to be played out in a variety of contexts.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, this type of learning also has an experiential and immersive quality that enables learning to occur through both participation and observation while, in the process, providing further avenues to learn about things. Ideally, \textit{learning about} and \textit{learning to do} should occur in tandem culminating in a balance between theory and its application. Placing too much emphasis on theorising without application may produce paralysis. Alternatively, placing too much emphasis on action unsupported by theory may produce catastrophic results.
Learning to become yourself: This type of learning, as the name suggests, connects learning to notions of personal development. Here the goal of personal development is to realise one’s full potential. Reflection is key to this ongoing process of self-discovery and, in terms of achieving full potential, so is an ability to learn how to learn. Learning how to learn involves learning about one’s strengths and weaknesses as a learner in order to become more proficient at problem-solving. As Army personnel learn to ‘become themselves’, values and attitudes are formed. Becoming ‘oneself’ is an interesting notion in military institutions such as Army, where it could be argued that individual identity formation takes a backseat to the formation of a collective identity designed to produce conformity, cohesion, and social order. In this respect, ‘learning to become yourself’ would only be permissible insofar as such learning does not result in the generation of values and attitudes which contravene cultural norms, and behaviours harmful to the Army brand.

Learning things with others: This type of learning is primarily concerned with learning that occurs through social interaction. Most often, this pertains to learning which occurs as a consequence of belonging to a group or team. Learning things with others can still involve learning about a particular subject matter, but also incorporates the idea of learning about one’s own strengths and weaknesses through the process of working collaboratively with others. Taken a step further, this may also include learning how to get along with others, becoming familiar with and modifying one’s behaviour in accordance with group norms and expectations. Combined arms combat teams, battlegroups and, on a larger scale, units, are places where learning things with others is fostered within Army.

It is tempting to view working and the four types of learning highlighted above as mutually exclusive or conflicting activities. Such a view posits learning and work as discrete activities, often with the former occurring in preparation for the latter, resulting in the production of recognised qualifications and/or skills which enable workers to perform tasks associated with forthcoming roles. In this scenario, learning finishes and then working begins — that is, until a bump occurs in our career trajectory forcing us to return to learning in order to become qualified for our next role. Working and learning, of course, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the workplace is where learning attains its relevance and currency. This is the learning derived from the rich insights gained from being soldiers, soldiers reflecting on and harnessing the knowledge acquired through experience, whether in the barracks or on operations. In this regard, learning is not another job for soldiers to undertake, but more importantly, occurs alongside work, often informally, and as
a consequence of day-to-day practice. This sort of learning is facilitated through enculturation, observation, social and networked interaction and participation. If captured, this learning can be the impetus for organisational innovation, creativity and transformation. The informal learning culture which shapes these learning opportunities is dynamic, living and emergent, as opposed to formalised constructions of ‘culture’ which are frequently imposed on organisations from above as part of culture change initiatives.

These four types of learning complement existing systems designed to facilitate individual and team learning across Army and, through careful integration, can assist with the development of skilled, educated, agile and resilient personnel. However, the examples of learning highlighted above do not occur in a vacuum. Culture, expressed through organisational values, norms and expectations, informs the extent to which these types of learning manifest across Army. As both signifiers and shapers of culture, leaders play a key role in creating workplace environments which support learning; for example through the creation of supportive environments in which personnel are encouraged to ask questions, challenge assumptions behind strategic thinking, reflect on mistakes, innovate, and take risks. Is this a realistic expectation within the Army context? Should all leaders in the Australian Army be charged with responsibility for facilitating learning? If a more pragmatic response is warranted, which leaders ought to adopt this role? How much questioning and risk-taking should they permit? At what point can asking a question be perceived as an outright challenge to a commander’s authority? Such considerations highlight the danger of simply trying to replace a generic learning organisation culture with another. An important part of Army’s learning in this respect relates to finding an appropriate balance between leadership behaviours which facilitate learning, critical thinking and innovation, as well as respect for authority.

A word of caution is warranted here. There is an assumption in the learning organisation rhetoric that all learning is good, and that learning in itself is enough and will automatically lead to desirable outcomes. In relation to the first observation that all learning is good, we can probably think of many examples where learning can lead to undesirable outcomes. One, after all, can learn how to make petrol bombs, avoid tax, rort the system, turn a blind eye to injustice, not get caught, as well as pass on ‘good’ news rather than all news. In terms of learning being enough in itself, learning is a valuable pursuit, but if Army is to become more agile and adaptive, the learning has to be applied in ways that are useful to the organisation so as to produce a change in behaviour. This learning can be applied
up front: informing strategic thinking, planning and change management initiatives. It can also occur after the event by feeding lessons back into the organisation or through conducting reviews and the like, such as those associated with *Pathway to Change*. For all of these things to occur, the learning needs to be captured so that the organisation as a whole can benefit, an issue touched on in the next section.

**Who is doing the learning?**

Related to the question of what sort of learning is occurring in the Australian Army, is the identification of who is learning. In this respect, we can speak of the learning journeys of individuals, or individual learning; the learning by individuals in groups and teams, or team learning; and learning which occurs at a collective level, or organisational learning. Since aspects of individual and team learning have already been discussed, this article now turns its attention to organisational learning.

An easy assumption to make is that if all individuals are learning, the organisation is learning as well. However, organisational learning is more than the sum of individual learning.²⁴ As discussed, individuals learn within organisations through such things as workplace learning, and training and education initiatives designed to enhance their personal development opportunities. The organisation learns when learning/knowledge is embedded or stored within the organisation so that it becomes part of the organisational memory and the insights derived from these lessons (new knowledge) are used to inform desirable changes in practice/behaviour.²⁵

In order to become a learning organisation, it is important that Army personnel know what types of knowledge are held in the organisation (and among individuals) so that this knowledge can be shared. Such knowledge-sharing can occur through so-called ‘soft’ approaches such as teamwork, collaboration, and facilitative leadership, and ‘hard’ learning processes and infrastructures which facilitate the generation, collection, interpretation and dissemination of information.²⁶ Hard processes and infrastructures can include both high and low technology systems to capture, store and share learning.²⁷ Within the Army context, low technology approaches involve the capturing/codification and dissemination of knowledge through written reports, doctrine, routines and the like. High technology approaches include the use of databases, share points and various portals to ensure that information moves up and down the chain of command, as well as laterally through sanctioned websites offered by the Defence intranet.
While the Australian Army has many hard and soft mechanisms to facilitate knowledge-sharing across the organisation, the knowledge-sharing potential of these mechanisms is subject to a variety of factors which could inhibit organisational learning. Hard mechanisms are reliant on ongoing maintenance and system support to prevent degradation of service. Information systems also require careful coordination and integration to maximise their knowledge-sharing potential. Organisational restructures and the redistribution of resources and effort brought about by climates of extreme fiscal constraint can place considerable pressure on information technology support teams to provide more with less. Similarly, soft mechanisms are reliant on the maintenance and coordination of (social) systems so that knowledge-sharing capacities do not degrade. In this respect, knowledge-sharing is encouraged through the development of trust, mateship, notions of reciprocity, mentorship, and the development of shared understanding. If organisations value these soft mechanisms for knowledge creation and transfer, they need to create spaces and opportunities for this type of social interaction to occur.

Once again, culture provides the glue for holding the hard and soft learning framework together. Mechanisms for learning (or change for that matter) are unlikely to yield productive learning outcomes (desired changes in behaviour) if they are not embedded within an appropriate organisational culture — a culture in which the shared values and beliefs shape the way organisational members think, feel and behave. There is a stark difference between Army having the technological and social structures in place to support knowledge-sharing, and having personnel who voluntarily want to share their knowledge with others. While the existence of shared organisational values and beliefs may not guarantee that knowledge-sharing will occur, they can at least create the cultural conditions in which knowledge-sharing is more likely to occur. Creating and enacting behavioural norms which encourage voluntary knowledge-sharing will further assist the production of a supportive learning culture.
Conclusion

How we think about (organisational) culture, its origins, representative power, and significance for the attitudes and behaviour of organisational members, informs the ways in which we respond to so-called cultural crises. These same cultural considerations, however, can also be a powerful tool for enabling organisations to gain strategic advantage. When allied with a cultural mindset which values learning — a mindset which is translated into norms and expectations which encourage learning behaviours at individual, team and organisational levels, organisations such as the Australian Army can increase their capacity for adaptation.

Greater organisational agility and adaptation can occur when individual learning is embedded into organisational systems, processes and structures. The Australian Army already has mechanisms in place to successfully identify and capture insights derived from operations. Through validation processes these insights become lessons which may be codified as doctrine and transformed into a variety of tactics, techniques or procedures for subsequent operations. To further enhance organisational agility and adaptation an additional but related learning system might be considered. By employing similar processes and mechanisms to those used to facilitate organisational learning from lessons gained from operational contexts, this learning system would focus more on the analysis of lessons arising from informal and barracks-based learning contexts. This second system would assist with the identification of process-oriented lessons and consider their significance to longer term policy-driven and change-management issues such as the efficacy of structural reforms, as well as cultural concerns articulated within Pathway to Change.

The trick in all this is to learn useful things and, more to the point, make learning useful. Learning becomes useful through organisational consumption and application. Through purposeful and timely application, learning adds value. Value is added through the retrospective application of learning that is captured following an event, and when learning is proactively sought and strategically applied at the “front end” — informing decision-making. The Australian Army cannot afford the luxury of learning for learning’s sake. Useful learning provides the impetus for performance improvement by assisting personnel to maximise their potential in their efforts to meet personal and organisational goals. With this in mind, it is worth remembering that the Army is not a university, and the primary goal of all personnel is not learning. This is fine. The Australian Army does not
need to create more scholars to maximise its learning potential. In order to reach its learning potential, however, it does need to create cultural conditions in which learning becomes a normal feature of practice.

It is important to end with the following two observations. First, this article adopts a very organisationally centric view of culture to argue a case for growing cultures conducive to learning in the Australian Army. The Australian Army sits within a broader societal context. The learning cultures discussed here are premised on the voluntary cooperation and somewhat altruistic desire of personnel to put organisational interests ahead of their own. It could be argued that the modern Australian landscape is one which promotes excessive individualism and self-interest over collectivism and collective interests. If this is the case, the Australian Army's aspirations for becoming more like a learning organisation may be made more difficult by the presence of broader societal expectations which run counter to this goal. Second, is there a chance that, with all this emphasis on culture at the moment, we have missed something? In our haste to point the finger at culture, have we done so at the expense of focussing our attention on possible economic, systemic or political conditions which inform organisational disquiet? Thus, although well-intentioned, we may be creating cultural fixes for economic, political, structural and systemic problems.
THE AUTHOR

Steven Talbot works within the human science discipline in the domains of social and organisational learning. While at DSTO, he has examined issues relating to learning organisations, social and organisational learning, lesson capture and dissemination. Steven has a PhD in Sociology from Flinders University, South Australia.

ENDNOTES


10 Ibid.


12 Senge, The Fifth Discipline.
13 Hodgkinson, "Managerial Perceptions of Barriers to Becoming a ‘Learning Organisation’.


20 The notion of learning to become yourself adopts a social constructionist view of identity formation. In this regard, self identities are viewed as being socially and historically constituted, subject to change and negotiation, in opposition to a ‘fixed’ or predetermined notion of self which minimises individual agency.


