Developing a learning organisation

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Abstract:

The learning organisation is an organisation which consciously and continuously betters its capacity to learn and develop both at an individual -, group -, and organisational level. The purpose is to increase efficiency, flexibility and the ability to change.

The learning organisation is continually developing its capacity to create its own future.

NTNU Library is the second largest university library in Norway, with the nations largest and most comprehensive collections covering technology and architecture.

The rapid change from traditional collections to e-resources, seen particularly within technological libraries, may cause a feeling that traditional library-values are being threatened. To counter this, we need a flexible attitude in management and staff alike. We should all have an open mind for what will serve our user groups best today, regardless of what we used to do yesterday.

During the past two years, the NTNU Library has been establishing the framework of a learning organisation. In the spring of 2002 the senior management group, some middle managers and union representatives were given a training course in management philosophy, communication skills, coaching, and team-working, along with practical testing of an assortment of useful tools.

This was followed by two-day seminars for the entire staff both in 2002 and 2003. The purpose is to implement both the philosophy and the practical aspects of the learning organisation in all parts of the library.

The library has established a number of common values, as well as principles we all have to relate to in our daily work.

We are far from done in our venture, but already we find that the principles, tools and skills we have learned tend to make differences of opinion less threatening, meetings more efficient, and the acceptance of a changing future more widespread.

This paper will focus on the methods used to develop a learning organisation, positive and negative response, status today, and future plans.

NTNU Library – background information

The University of Trondheim was reorganised into the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in 1996.

At about the same time the NTNU Library was established in a merger of the former three libraries attached to the university. One centred on the humanities and social sciences, one technological – both approximately of equal size – as well as a smaller medical library. The oldest part of our library originated in 1760 as the Library of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters. It contains books and special collections of great historical and cultural importance. The

technological library came into being in 1912, shortly after the establishment of the Norwegian Institute of Technology in Trondheim. It has the largest collections of literature about technology and architecture in Norway, and has served as the national information centre for research and industry in these fields.

NTNU Library is the second largest university library in Norway, with collections of 2,6 mill volumes, a staff of 151 - on 11 different locations in Trondheim. During the past two years we have reduced the staff by about 8%. Staff reductions will continue based on normal retirement, or voluntary change of work. Replacements are only taken in when absolutely necessary. Savings on salary are channelled into the literature budget.

We are organised in seven sections reporting to the Library Director. Two of these are support-sections (R&D, administration) and the remaining five cover the various subject libraries. The library director and the seven section heads makes up the senior management team. Within each section unit leaders takes care of daily management of groups of personnel. Cross-sectional groups co-ordinate practice in central areas such as acquisitions, cataloguing, marketing etc. These groups report to the R&D section.

The library units are as follows:

- Section for Technology and Architecture:
  - Main Library for Technology
  - Library for Architecture, Civil Engineering and Product Design
  - Marine Technology Library
  - Valgrinda Library
  - Trondheim Academy of Fine Art Library
- Section for Humanities and Social Sciences:
  - Dragvoll Library
  - Trondheim Music Conservatory Library
- Gunnerus Library
- Dora, remote storage facility
- Natural Science Library
- Medical Library

All three merged units of the NTNU Library had strong local traditions based on collections and service demanded by their user groups. Traditions and types of service varied a great deal from one unit to the other. Switching loyalties to make us all feel like one library – one team – instead of the traditional "us versus them", has been a challenge.

The rapid change from traditional collections to e-resources, seen particularly within technological libraries, has not only changed the physical library. It has widened access to the collection for large user groups, while severely limiting it for others. The Technical University Library of Norway had a national responsibility to support Norwegian industry and research. Terms of use laid down in the subscription agreements for many e-publications today makes this impossible for the NTNU Library. We are able to help walk-in users from the general public, but not a commercial research scientist in some remote area of the country.

Library users can access an increasing number of full-text periodicals and books by computers all over campus, or from their home. They no longer need to visit the library in person quite as often as before – if at all. The library as a repository of information, is making way for the library as a gateway to digital information.

Through this the library may emerge as a learning centre where you can find all the help necessary to access and use information in digital form or on paper.

We have a most stable and competent staff, well versed in traditional library skills, with a high reputation for delivering good service both at our university and on a national level. Modern times are not, however, always kind to tradition. Some librarians feel that their traditional values are being threatened. This may trigger a natural resistance to change.

We need flexibility in management and staff alike. We should all have an open mind for what will serve our user groups best today, regardless of what we used to do yesterday.

In order to accomplish this we need to create a new company identity, based both on tradition and the needs of the modern university. The principles and ideas of the learning organisation seem to give us the basic tools and attitudes we need.

The learning organisation

The learning organisation is an organisation which consciously and continuously betters its capacity to learn and develop both at an individual -, group -, and organisational level. The learning organisation is continually developing its capacity to create its own future.

The learning organisation works continuously towards a common goal:

- Creating a learning environment, which leads to:
  - an increased ability to learn
  - increasing efficiency
  - increasing flexibility
  - an increased ability to change

Learning, in this case, means processes that makes it possible for each staff member to develop new knowledge, new skills, attitudes and behavioural habits.

Principles of interaction between individuals, acceptable patterns of behaviour, as well as a number of useful theoretical and practical tools makes everyday work easier, and conflicts fewer.

It is preferable to have a fairly flat organisation, based on units or modules with a high degree of responsibility and independence.

In a learning organisation there is a stimulating work-environment, based on:

- A general climate of co-operation.
- Mutual respect and trust regardless of formal positions.
- Open channels of communication. No "secrets" or hidden agendas.
- Different skills and opinions being considered a bonus.
- Development of everyone's ability to create.
- Minimising fear and uncertainty about the work-situation or the future.
- Encouraging experimental attitudes. Take a risk. Coaching and new chances if you fail. We all make mistakes!
- Lots of humour and positive awareness.

To achieve this type of work-environment each individual must:

- Know which way we are heading
- See and experience a full understanding of what we are doing and why
- Dare to challenge the present

- Feel good about themselves, their work and their colleagues
- Participate in inspiring team-work
- Be able to influence their own work-situation
- Experience that their own values match those of the organisation

Turning the library into a learning organisation

In establishing the framework of a learning organisation, - the senior management team, leaders of the larger units and staff union representatives (18 people in all) were given a ten day, professionally led, training course – spread over four sessions, in the spring of 2002. To get the best possible total effect, some of these courses were held out of town.

The main subjects covered were:

- Session 1: Organisational and management philosophy – Leadership in a changing world. (2 days)
- Session 2: Communication skills, coaching. (3 days)
- Session 3: Team-building /-development. Methods and tools. (3 days)
- Session 4: Presentation skills. (2 days)

In the autumn of 2002 this was followed by two-day section-wise seminars, for the entire staff. Based on the training we just had received, we led these seminars ourselves.

Focus was on:

- Establishing a set of common values we could relate to in our daily work
- Learning and practising communication skills
- Using practical methods of problem solving.

Response to the seminars was generally quite good. We experienced a good learning environment, along with great enthusiasm and creativity in solving the given problems. We left for home with a feeling of having started something of value.

Running out of steam is a real danger in such a situation. Expectations run high, and unrealistic hopes are set for an immediate glittering future. Several groups started using some of the methods and principles we had learned right away, mainly in meetings. The results were encouraging. Meetings became more efficient and meaningful.

Two-day seminars for the entire staff were repeated in 2003, this time with mixed participation from all sections in each group. This had the added benefit of strengthening company identity of the NTNU Library as a whole. Factual problems were used as cases in practice sessions. We experienced that the use of learning organisation tools and ideas ran a lot smoother this time.

Unfortunately some people had been unable to participate in either of these seminars. A few of them remained doubtful about the whole idea.

Is this another version of the Emperors new clothes? Leadership ideas come and go. What is modern one year is obsolete the next…

To try to counter this we had to move on, and show the practical value of what we had learned.

We did learn a variety of things:

Organisational problems are common in many companies. Experience shows that up to 80% of errors made are caused by systemic faults, such as:

- Unclear/missing goals, strategies, basic values etc
- No common understanding of what practical leadership is all about
- Unclear roles, expectations, responsibilities, areas of authority
- Not enough delegation of authority
- Non-existing or bad routines in important areas
- Too much focus on targets and results
- Too little focus on the processes needed to reach them
- Lack of competence (in leadership and staff alike)
- Lack of information
- Ineffective meetings
- Less-than optimal company organisation
- Too little co-operation across functional and organisational boundaries

We have experienced a number of these problems in our organisation, based on different ways of thinking and working in the old libraries. Awareness of these faults makes it possible to rectify them, and thereby secure a smoother operation of the library.

A major point in the learning organisation is the attitude we should have towards one another:

- We are all of equal value, and we respect each other.
- We are all able to make positive contributions, and it is our right and obligation to participate in the decision process.
- People usually show more intelligent creativity when working together as a team, than they do when working alone.
- We shall have a positive attitude to our work and to one another.
- Support and encourage one another to the best of our ability, by giving constructive feedback.
- Meet well prepared, and participate actively in meetings.
- Communicate opinions and feelings in a free and open manner.
- Stick to the point.
- We all need to develop our knowledge and skills, and learn how to do things in a better way.
- Conflicts are discussed and solved in an open, forthright manner.
- Have a good time together.

Communication skills form another valuable lesson:

- The basics of good communication. Matching your pattern of communication, verbally and non-verbally, to the pattern of the other person.
- Learn how to listen.
- Active listening.
- Make sure you understand what the other person really means, not what you think or wish he/she means.
- Learn how to express your views in a clear, understandable manner.
- Learn how to present a message in such a way that it both reaches its target and gives a positive impression.

Creating an efficient role-structure to handle problem-based meetings.

- Leader/ co-ordinator

- Secretary
- Time-keeper
- Relevancy-checker
- Encourage participation
- Summing up
- Devils advocate

Methods/tools for meetings and problem solving:

- Open discussion
- The round table. Everyone takes turn commenting on the matter in question.
- Individual thinking – small group discussion – plenary discussion.
- Situation analysis – Perceived target – Needed action
- Force field analysis. In a given situation, which forces work for or against the solution?
- Brainstorming.
- Flow-chart analysis

Experiences:

What did we experience when we started using what we had learned?

- Initial reluctance:
  - We don't have time for this…I have a job to do.
  - Another fancy leadership theory!
  - Who did they visit this time?
  - I've been doing this for thirty years – I know how it's best done!
  - We don't do things like that in these parts…
- Large degree of acceptance by those who had taken part in the seminars, despite original doubts. Most of the 18 participants in the initial professional training course have shown a steady will to use and develop what they have learned.
- Cool attitude among several that have not taken part in the seminars.
- Old habits are hard to change.
- New habits are hard to establish.
- Initial difficulties in choosing the right tools/principles to use on each problem.

Status today:
- The library has established a set of basic values and principles for daily work and leadership within the entire organisation.
- We are more aware of the way we act towards one another, and try to enhance positive thinking and positive action.
- Better communication skills. We have learned how to listen.
- We use principles and tools consciously in meetings and group projects.
- Meetings are in general more structured than they used to be.
- Some members of staff are very enthusiastic users of learning organisation principles and tools whenever possible.
- Some are feeling a bit lukewarm about the whole thing. Results have not matched expectations.

- Another small group is not contributing much at all. They have not taken part in the seminars so far, and are very diligently pursuing work the way they always have.

Future plans and thoughts:

- Yearly staff seminars, lasting one or two days, will be used to build company loyalty, give practical experience in using learning organisation methods and skills, and to treat factual problems that need to be handled.
- New methods and attitudes should become an automatic reflex at meetings, in project work and daily business.
- Accepting new and controversial ideas and thoughts from other people – evaluating them only on the basis of merit – will give creativity good working conditions.
- Trench-warfare, where the old library fights the new digital one, will be avoided.

The implementation of learning organisation ideas has taught us to think in a more positive manner, be less afraid of changes, accept one another as the persons we are, and has given us a range of useful methods and tools in our daily work.

We should have insisted that all members of the library staff participate in the seminars from the very beginning. A common understanding of the underlying philosophy as well as the methods used is fundamental when you wish to change a whole organisation.

We realise that the full establishment of the NTNU Library as a learning organisation is a long and winding process. We will experience setbacks both on an organisational level and individually.

Even so – we feel that the benefits reaped at this early stage promises well for the future.