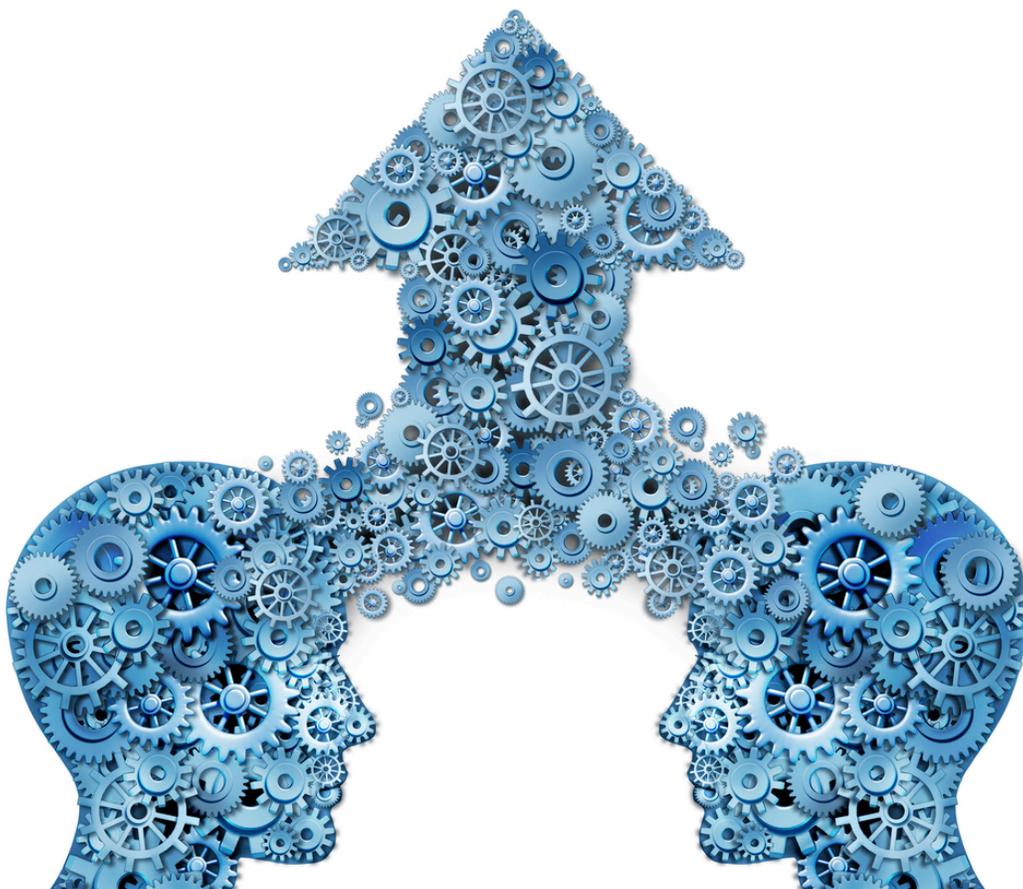# Building a Continuous Learning Culture

Is your organization overwhelmed by unremitting waves of change? Then embrace the flux with systems and attitudes that encourage trial and error

By Jana Raver

About the author

Jana Raver is an associate professor and E. Marie Shantz Faculty Fellow in Organizational Behaviour at Queen's School of Business, and is also cross-appointed to the Department of Psychology. She is an authority on interpersonal relations and group processes at work, with a specific emphasis upon the ways in which employees support each other and build high-performance environments versus engage in counterproductive actions that undermine each other. A second area of her expertise pertains to workplace diversity and cultural differences, where her current focus is on the integration of diverse or dissimilar employees into work groups and organizations. Her work has also included cross-cultural investigations of conflict processes and societal control systems.

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ONE OF THE CHALLENGES IN MANY ORGANIZATIONS IS DEALING WITH AN ongoing sense of flux. This is the idea that the environment is constantly changing, forcing leaders, managers, and staff to constantly change as well. Unfortunately, traditional models of large-scale change implementations do not offer the tools and systems to embrace the continuous learning that is needed to help people continuously adapt.

Continuous organizational flux feels as if you're helplessly being hit by wave after wave. When you see organizational flux as something that's simply being done to you and over which you have no control, you tend to perceive flux as a stressor and resist it. You avoid putting out extra effort that would help the enterprise perform more effectively.

There is a better way. It is to think about flux as a natural state in which you move with the ebb and the flow. Indeed, many have argued that constant change is the natural order in biological systems. If we think of continuous change as a natural state, how do we actually embrace it?

By "continuous learning culture" I am not referring to training and development but rather to changing the way in which we adapt within the organizational environment. It is about getting people to see change as something they lead in pursuit of organizational objectives. In this organizational culture, the role of leadership is not to have all the solutions but to inspire others, explain the challenges, share information, and engage employees in the problem-solving process. Leaders trust employees to find the answers. And when employees make their case, leaders are open to listening.

Elements of a Continuous Learning Culture

In organizations with a continuous learning culture, work processes are not firmly set in stone but are actually part of a larger process of ongoing experimentation. The attitude is that it is normal to change the way you do things in order to continuously improve. It is supported by multi-directional feedback that crosses hierarchies to help people learn more effectively. The work processes encourage trial and error. Here are some key elements.

> A GROWTH MINDSET

Psychologist Carol Dweck and others have documented the differences between a growth mindset and fixed mindset. A growth mindset is the belief that ability is malleable, that it can actually be improved through learning: more effort, good strategies, effective feedback. A fixed mindset holds that abilities are largely innate — you are a born leader, mathematics wizard, a 'people person' great with customers, a software programming genius.

Hundreds of studies have demonstrated that these divergent beliefs have different consequences on the effort people are willing to put into work, their response to failure, their openness to feedback, and their willingness to collaborate. This carries significant implications.

If you have more of a fixed mindset, for example, you're concerned about proving yourself and making sure you look smart. So when you or someone else are faced with a setback, you see yourself or the other person as a failure. You avoid challenges to avoid the possibility of failing. Effort is viewed as something not terribly beneficial — if you don't have an ability to do something, trying to develop it is not going to change anything. As a result, constructive criticism is seen as an insult or a threat to the self rather than an opportunity to improve.

Having a fixed mindset is not necessarily detrimental as long as you stay within an area in which you are already succeeding and nothing threatens your success. But when you are faced with challenges and different circumstances that push you beyond your comfort zone, a fixed mindset becomes maladaptive.

On the other hand, that's where growth minds excel. From a growth mindset perspective, ability is just something you develop. Your performance on any given task is nothing more than a demonstration of where you are right now. Setbacks are perceived as, This wasn't good, I failed. What do I need to do differently? People with this mindset recognize that effort is beneficial for developing abilities and ongoing feedback is something that is not only tolerated but actually embraced.

Research shows that mindsets have a tremendous amount of influence on the ways in which people pursue growth and change in organizations. It has also been shown that growth mindsets encourage what is known as psychological safety, when people feel they can speak up, ask for help, or admit mistakes. Psychological

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safety in group work is often governed by the beliefs and practices of the leader in that group, making it particularly important for those leaders to have a growth mindset. It is one of the strongest factors linked to actual learning behaviours in teams.

This simple belief system has many downstream effects. And it influences whether or not you're able to continue building a continuous learning culture.

> A PURPOSE MOTIVE

Many organizations try to increase engagement levels by inspiring their employees to ask themselves, Why are we doing this?

Years ago, James C. Collins, a management consultant and author of *Good to Great*, and Jerry I. Porras, a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, developed a useful model for how organizations can create a vision with employee involvement. In the model, the process starts with identifying the core ideology: What is it that we stand for? What do we value? These are values that are held so strongly that the organization would rather cease to exist than give them up. From there, employees create a vision of where the organization is going in the future. It comes together as: We are pursuing this larger purpose and making sure we align with this purpose through our daily actions.

In a continuous learning culture, work processes are not firmly set in stone but are part of a larger process of ongoing experimentation

Consider the experience of Sony. After the Second World War, Japanese products were regarded as having poor quality. In the 1950s, Sony expressed a compelling vision: "*We will create products that become pervasive around the world. . . We will be the first Japanese company to go into the U.S market and distribute directly. . . We will succeed with innovations that U.S companies have failed at — such as the transistor radio . . . Fifty years from now our brand name will be as well known as any around the world. . . and will signify innovation and quality that rival the most innovative companies anywhere.*"

That was quite a vision for the times. Sony was able to ignite energy and effort in part because it was something people could envision. This vision is very effective at a strategic level. But what

can be done to develop such focused sense of purpose on the ground level?

Say you're launching a new project with your team. What is its larger purpose? Not just what we're going to do but why are we doing it? What are we pursuing? How are we going to be able to achieve something differently? The benefit of having this vision-based communication is that it sends the message that you are all in this together. The journey may not be as pleasant as the destination but you are willing to work through it.

When you communicate the vision and purpose of a project, you also need to communicate the desired outcomes without necessarily prescribing the path you will take to get those outcomes. People and teams should have the autonomy to find the path that works best for them and to continually change and improve along the way.

A third step is to let go of some of the process control. It begins with sharing information. Your employees cannot be a resource if they do not know what's going on, and restricting information creates stress. But if you start this process, leaders must be prepared to listen to the insights that emerge. If employees are sufficiently motivated to give you answers and you won't listen, the next time you ask they will tune out.

> EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SYSTEMS

The suggestion boxes of the 1980s are dead, for a good reason — they didn't work very well. There are different ways of doing it now that encourage employee feedback on a far more dynamic level.

If you're planning an employee idea generation program, put in place certain conditions. One, it needs to be in line with your culture and vision of where you are headed (the core values mentioned above). Two, employees must be able to track the progress of the idea within the system. Three, leaders must give feedback and explanations for any decisions very promptly.

Successful employee suggestion systems ensure that people can see the link between the original idea and its implementation. That means giving credit to those people who came up with the good idea in the first place. This offers both personal satisfaction as well as an opportunity for career advancement. But be careful about tying bonuses to employee suggestion programs. I've seen too many problems with people giving ideas simply because they're required to or for a bonus. The intrinsic joy and recognition of ownership over

ideas often is more motivating because it is more about doing it for the overall vision of the enterprise.

And then make sure your ongoing suggestion program is part of continuous improvement as well. Technology can help. There are online platforms in which employees can post their ideas and comment on and further develop ideas submitted by colleagues.

> WORK PROCESSES THAT ENCOURAGE TRIAL AND ERROR

This is about making sure leaders have created space and time for experimentation. A great example is how Google allows its employees to devote 20 percent of their workday to what has been described as "play time," a period when they can try new ideas and develop something different.

If you go down this road, ensure there is a strong positive energy in the workplace. If people are just going through the drudgery of uninspired work and then are required to take an hour on Friday afternoon in order to have fun with ideas, it will become a joke. Pay attention to building a positive supportive environment in which people have the motivation and energy to think divergently.

> MULTI-DIRECTIONAL FEEDBACK

In order to create a continuous learning culture, feedback has to be embedded as a key feature. It needs to be ongoing multi-directional feedback, given and received with a growth mindset. The attitude should be that feedback is part of how you get better. It should be focused on tasks and not personally threatening.

Making this form of feedback a normal part of how the organization works can take many forms, such as regular check-ins and progress reports. The trick is to get people to share their work-in-progress rather than waiting until it is completed. Many are more comfortable showing their work only once it is fully presentable, but by doing so they are usually committed to a course of action; at that point, opportunities for change and growth can be limited. The discipline of daily check-ins, when colleagues or a supervisor can offer feedback on the fly, can break this habit.

Keep in mind that the more people must collaborate on a project, the more frequently they need to collaborate to give feedback. The peers on your project team can be great resources. They are far more involved at your level so both advice seeking and advice giving will make your team project far more successful.

Leaders, on the other hand, are often very good at giving feedback and less good at asking the right questions in order to spur improvement. The lesson for leaders is to think about feedback in terms of a question. In order to point out that something might need to be done differently, ask employees, How will this be implemented? How do you think we might overcome this challenge? You are asking the employees how they can address the challenges you have identified rather than telling them how to do it. By allowing employees to retain ownership over their work, leaders are further encouraging a higher level of employee engagement.

This is what continuous learning culture looks like at the end of the day. It's getting each one of these practices in place — from the core belief through the leadership processes, employee trust, ongoing experimentation, and robust feedback system to offer guidance on works in progress.

To learn more:
Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, by Carol Dweck

What Continuous Learning Looks Like at Pixar

One organization really good at supporting a continuous learning culture is Pixar Animation Studios. In describing Pixar's culture, President Ed Catmull has said that management's job is not to prevent risk but to build the capability to recover when failures occur. "It must be safe to tell the truth. We must constantly challenge all of our functions and search for the flaws that could destroy our culture."

Pixar employees fully embrace continuous learning across all levels. Everyone is encouraged to give notes to one another on their work. Even at the more senior level, department division leaders are able to engage help from others; it's called the brain trust. If someone needs help, this group is convened and spends two hours discussing the work in progress. So you can actually get senior leaders to help you work through a serious challenge.

They also have a practice called "the dailies." People open up their work daily to scrutiny, which creates many opportunities for improvement before the work proceeds too far. And they do take the open door policy very seriously. You can go see anyone in the organization and communication is indeed widespread.