Some Thoughts about the Learning Organization

A definition of the learning organization

The learning organization is one in which all systems, processes, and structures—at all system levels (individual, group, department, system-as-a-whole)—constantly seek data on system performance and use it at all levels to make the organization more productive /creative now (integration) and position it as best it can to succeed in an uncertain future and an uncertain environment (adaptation). The central feature of the learning organization is its commitment to seeking and using feedback for development. Training is one strategy a learning organization uses, but training as a concept is not central to the definition of a learning organization. (In fact, organizations that tout their investment in training as central to their claim to being a learning organization are often hiding a darker reality.)

Some Characteristics of the learning organization

At the system-as-a-whole level:
- the organization views its customers as partners
- management regularly seeks out feedback from its environment (external and internal) and uses it for system improvement (both improving what already is and growing to stay congruent with a changing environment)
- the organization is structured to maximize the number of individuals who are in contact with the environment (i.e., the structure is relatively flat) and therefore in a position to learn from it
- the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” attitude is understood to be a quaint relic of another era
- a system for 360 feedback for all managers is in place
- “NIH” is banished from the organization’s lexicon
- there is a belief in place that the facts are friendly....there is a focus on problem-solving and not blaming
- the culture allows for mistakes to be made and learned from
- managers, employees, and human resource specialists partner in creating learning/development opportunities on the job
- “after action” review of performance is a culture norm
- there is a commitment to continuous learning as the basis for continuous evolution

At the group/departmental level:
- managers understand that their role is to be the keeper of the questions rather than the guardian
of the answers
-sub-systems regularly seek feedback from their environment (external and internal) and use it for process improvement
-groups and teams take time out periodically to review how they are doing
-systems and processes are in place to support group-team/departmental development that is relevant to the organization’s mission

At the individual level:
-systems and processes are in place to support individual growth and development that is relevant to the organization’s mission
-individuals are encouraged to be (and rewarded for being) life-long learners
-the employee’s ego ideal is not bounded by the job...rather, the individual understands that s/he has a collection of skills/knowledge/abilities that can be applied to a variety of tasks
-the ability to learn is understood to be a key ska
-the individual is aware of the larger job market in which s/he fits
-the individual understands that staying on top of his/her field is a basic requirement of the job
-continuous learning is built into all jobs
-the individual regularly seeks feedback from management, customer, and peers and uses it for individual improvement (may be in the form of 360 degree feedback or a multi-rater performance feedback process)