

# Challenging Organisations and Society

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## Mental Leaps into Challenging Organisations and Society

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# Detecting and Approaching Obstacles for Collective Learning

## Abstract

Let us assume that organizations want to blossom in order to achieve their goals in the best possible manner. Why, then, does this fail to occur so often, despite major efforts in HRM such as education, development of competencies, and management training?

This article deals with learning obstacles in organizations. These obstacles inhibit the use of available capacities and ideas. In addition to individual learning, learning in organizations also principally means collective learning. This type of learning is important so that we do not have to continually reinvent the wheel and do not repeat the same mistakes, but it is also crucial in developing the ability to approach change effectively. This article focuses on what a manager or consultant can do, and provides guidelines for detecting learning obstacles in organizations based on a fresh way of looking at organizational development. These guidelines provide selection criteria for methods of obstacle prevention or removal. Some interactive methods will be further elaborated, in order to contribute to more effective collaboration in meeting the challenges of organizations and society.

## I What is collective learning? An introduction

This article is about collective learning in organizations. I see collective learning as the development of the ability to see more possibilities and use them to achieve the organization's goals. Collective learning is meant to enable the organization to grow and blossom – to grow up, so to speak. As such, I do not talk about 'the learning organization', because this term suggests that learning itself is the goal.

Collaborations sometimes fail to blossom at all because learning obstacles inhibit collective learning. This article aims to provide insight into the causes of this phenomenon, and furthermore intends to offer a helping hand in the prevention or reduction of these learning obstacles. The following questions illustrate the article's key points:

- Why is collective learning important? The social context
- How can collective learning be developed? An explanatory theory on the levels of development for collaborations
- How do learning obstacles arise? Detecting obstacles at a particular level of development
- What approach is appropriate for a particular learning obstacle? Guidelines for leaders and professionals

### 1.1 Why is collective learning important?

Our society is becoming increasingly complex and dynamic. For many organizations, this means that change is part of the daily routine and can no longer be regarded as a temporary interruption of the “normal” state of affairs. In addition to this, work in the Netherlands is increasingly shifting from manufacturing to a service-based economy. Providing proper service in a changing society requires continuous social innovation. An organization's ability to successfully adapt to this kind of rapidly changing environment and to effectively allocate its resources exists in direct proportion to its capacity for collective learning.

If you ask people, “Can you perform better than you are right now?” the answer is almost always, “Yes.” This answer suggests that people are not making the most of their capacities. The first reaction of managers and consultants is often: more training and education. Various studies have shown that only 25% of the performance obstacles lie with the individual: personal knowledge, motivation or skills. The remaining 75% is attributable to factors in the organization: physical environment, steering/processes, information/communication<sup>1</sup>. In this case, additional individual training would con-

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<sup>1</sup> See article by Jos Arets & Vivian Heijnen (2006)

tribute little to the organization's growth because there are evidently obstacles inhibiting the use of available capacities. Change projects implemented to remove these obstacles, such as competency management or culture change projects, also fail to deliver the intended results in over 80% of cases<sup>2</sup>. This adds up to wasted time, money, and energy. How can this be elucidated and what possibilities does this offer to promote collective learning?

## 1.2 Disastrous learning processes

According to Arnold Cornelis (see his book, *The Logic of Feeling*<sup>3</sup>), the downfall of these learning processes is attributable in large part to the fact that they are looking for a solution in a place where the answer simply cannot be. He calls these “disastrous learning processes”. He has developed a knowledge theory that provides insight into how learning processes proceed through the various developmental stages of life and work relationships. Feeling plays a major role in his theory. Our feelings tell us where new experiences should be placed, whether we experience them as “Logical” or not. That is why he named his theory the Logic of Feeling. I have elaborated his theory for organizational application in the Logic of Will, Discipline, and Communication. This Logic can be used to examine the extent to which an organization is capable of learning from experience.

This Logic is a radically different approach from most models for organizational development, in that:

- It appears not as a statistical arrangement into matrices, but a dynamic development in time.
- It involves unconscious biological factors in collaboration alongside the conscious managerial and communicative factors.
- Feeling has an important guiding function.

First, I shall provide an explanation of the Logic of Feeling as a theory for knowledge development, followed by its application as a model for collective learning in organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> See Boonstra & de Caluwé (2007)

<sup>3</sup> Cornelis (1993). The book is written in Dutch with the title “De logica van het gevoel”.

## 2 The Logic of Feeling as a theory of learning

People's learning in a collaboration is developed in phases. From internal steering (what do I need?) to external steering (what should we adhere to, how do we fill in our planning, and control cycle, what management systems do we need) to self-steering (how does what we are doing fit in with the societal objective that the organization stands for?).

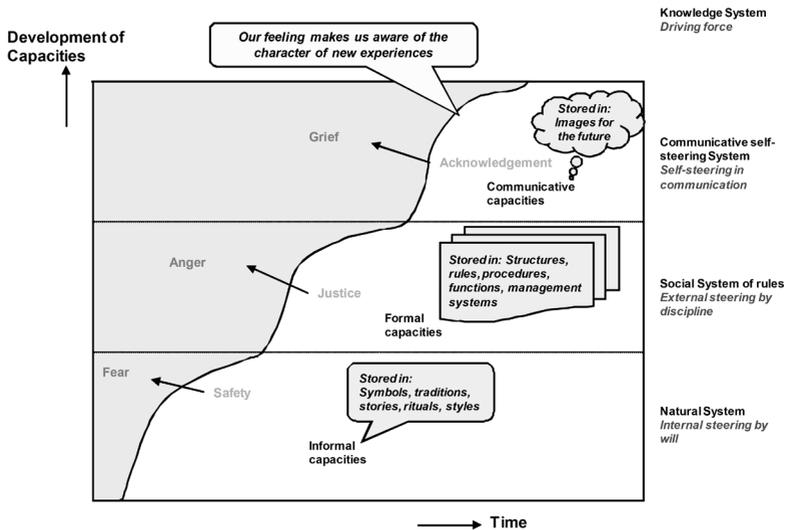


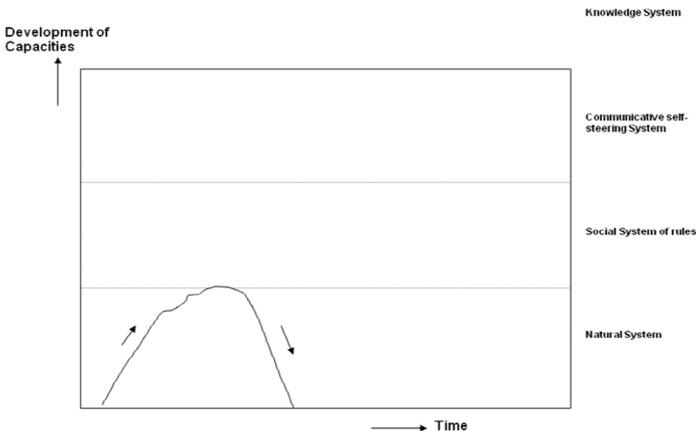
Figure 1: Development of capacities in organizations

Figure 1 shows how the development of capacities, i.e. learning, proceeds through various phases. This model is applicable to any unit of organization, from individual to society. In this article, I discuss “the organization”, which can be imagined as a work system. A work system may correspond to a business or institution, but it can also refer to a department or a project organization. It is important to select this focus before applying the model. Of course, reality is much more complex than a model and confusion can easily arise if it is not clear whether we are talking about a department, an entire company, or a network. An explanation of figure 1 is given in the sections below.

## 2.1 The Natural System: the will to grow

First, the Natural System is developed. This is made up of the characteristics of the people present and the relationships that arise: the power relations. The development of the Natural System is steered by the internal motives of the individuals involved: the drive. For organizations, I call it the dimension of the will to grow. It is assumed that every living being and every organization wants to grow, wants to expand itself. The Natural System contains all informal attributes of the organization (the part of the iceberg that is underwater). It determines whether people feel “at home”. The memory of the Natural System is, to a large degree, unconscious. These unconscious “steering codes” manifest themselves in symbols, myths, stories, and rituals. These customs still stand out to the new employee, whereas others find them normal: “That’s how we do things here.” Internal steering that is too weak creates feelings of fear, whereas internal steering that is too strong leads to aggression and oppression.

### *Example of the Natural System: Crushed under the weight of your own drive for growth*



*A fledgling enterprise, an onion processing company, is led by two highly motivated entrepreneurs. Things are going well: the orders are flowing in. At present, there are about 50 people working in the company. Scheduling of*

*work activities is still carried out manually. The managers handle financial and personnel matters over the weekend. Stress is rising, for both management and staff. Hired consultants make plans for the professionalization of operational management. However, these plans do not get implemented: the production process takes precedence. A new production line is even added. Ever-increasing amounts of time and money must be spent on “putting out fires”. Eventually, the business is crushed under the weight of its own drive for growth.*

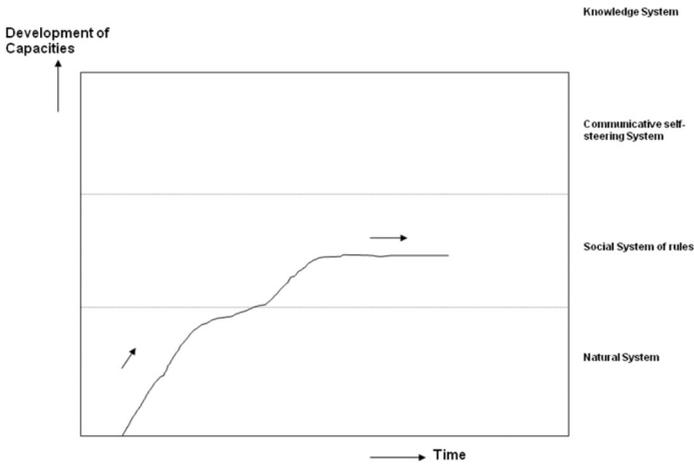
## **2.2 The Social Rule System: discipline for professionalization**

For efficient cooperation in the organization, additional steering is needed over the Natural System’s drive for growth. For this reason, people in the organization develop agreements to get affairs in order. These formal attributes make up the “Social Rule System”. The memory in the Social Rule System is in rules, procedures, organizational structures, job descriptions, management systems, etc. For efficient allocation of people and resources, discipline is needed to fulfill agreements and adjust them where necessary. The degree of discipline determines the way in which coordinated collaboration is possible, but also whether it is permissible to make mistakes and learn from them. Too much discipline inhibits learning and stifles creativity, which produces feelings of oppression. Too little discipline results in chaos and anger because things are poorly organized.

In this way, every organization develops its own “Logic”: a set of steering codes as models for what is Logical. These models are stored in the organization’s memory. The memory of the organization contains the largely unconscious memory from the Natural System (the “tacit knowledge”) and the conscious steering codes from the Social Rule System.

### ***Example of the Social Rule System: Bogged down in planning and verification***

*A local government division handles granting permits and environmental protection. For ten years, they have been busy implementing a quality assur-*



ance system that also generates management information. It is not lacking in plans. Procedures are described collectively, but that is not how they are executed. It has proved impossible to get employees to enter required data into the management information system. Furthermore, the rules are always changing, but making adjustments to the management system is a complicated and costly affair. Even after numerous studies and improvement projects, an adequate system still has not been successfully implemented.

### 2.3 System of Communicative Self-steering

At a certain point, robust growth from the Social Rule System no longer results in further development of the organization. More of the same offers no innovation and may also result in bureaucracy. We must ask the question: “How does what we are doing fit in with the organization we want to be?” This demands a new system that evaluates the Natural System and Social Rule System and steers them in communication with relevant persons. Cornelis <sup>4</sup> calls this the System of Communicative Self-steering. Here, the memory consists of the intentions of a person or organization: What do you want to learn? What kind of organization do you want to be? Development

4 Cornelis (1993)

of communicative self-steering creates a feeling of recognition, of doing meaningful work. Too little self-steering creates a feeling of depression, and too much self-steering results in disorientation and frustration.

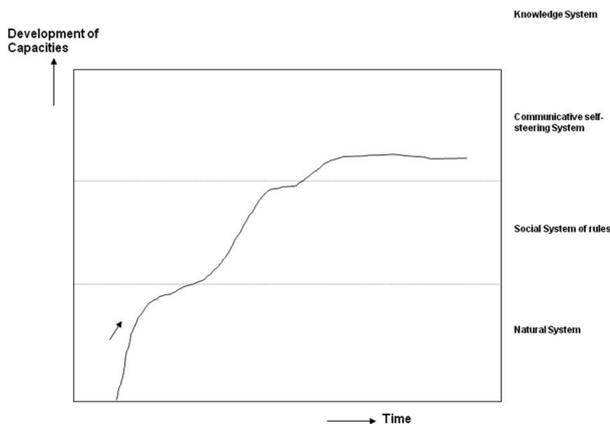
Thus, the development of capacities, i.e. learning in an organization, has dual-steering from two systems, which can be integrated by a third system. So every organization can develop three layers: Natural System, Social Rule System, and System of Communicative Self-steering.

A crucial point in this model is that one layer is not any more important than another. For complete and thorough development, you cannot miss any of the three layers. One system builds on another. Also bear in mind that this does not concern the development of individuals, but rather the entirety of the organization that you have in mind.

### *Example of System of Communicative Self-steering:*

#### *The umpteenth change project*

*A governmental organization has spent a great deal of time and energy on management development and involving employees in organizational development. The organization is among the best employers in the Netherlands. A large number of consulting firms are regular visitors involved in an equally*



*large number of change projects. Each change project comes with a reshuffling of positions. People are getting tired of it. What will this lead to?*

## 2.4 Feeling has an important guiding function

People's feelings have an important guiding function in this model. They tell us what system an issue is operating in. Thus, problems in the Natural System manifest themselves in fear, abuse of power, and aggression. Conflicts in the Social Rule System manifest themselves in anger and disputes over application of the rules. Problems in the System of Communicative Self-steering involve miscommunication and manifest themselves in protests and demonstrations. It is important to examine what systems the steering codes come from, because the learning processes will be disastrous if you are trying to explain a phenomenon from one system with explanations from another system.

In an existing organization, the system of internal steering is always present. The system of external steering can be strongly or weakly developed. The System of Communicative Self-steering is often weakly developed in organizations because performance pressure limits time for development of communication and reflection skills.

### ***It is not easy to take the step up to developing communicative self-steering.***

*Jaap Boonstra in Dynamics of Organizational Change and Learning*<sup>5</sup>:

*Continuous changing is connected to learning as a collective process. Changing and learning on the level of principles mean that people reorder relationships and activities, and deconstruct and reconstruct meanings together ... Learning is seen as a change in routines, response repertoires, and basic assumptions about social realities and interrelations. A range of skills, rules, insights, principles, and knowledge is altered in an interactive process of relating, acting, reflecting, interpreting, and sensemaking.*

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<sup>5</sup> Boonstra (2004, p. 452)

### 3 A model for collective learning in organizations: the Logic of Will, Discipline, and Communication.

Collective learning pertains to all aspects of the organization. Collective learning is based on both external steering (management, planning, verification) and internal steering (creativity, intuition, solidarity). André Wierdsma<sup>6</sup> distinguishes between various levels of collective learning in an organization. For these, he identifies various obstacles that often inhibit collective learning. In figure 2, I have combined Wierdsma's<sup>7</sup> classification with Arnold Cornelis's<sup>8</sup> Logic of Feeling to make the Logic of Will, Discipline, and Communication. The levels of collective learning are based on Arnold Cornelis's theory of knowledge. He talks about zero, first, and second order learning instead of single loop, double loop, and triple loop learn-

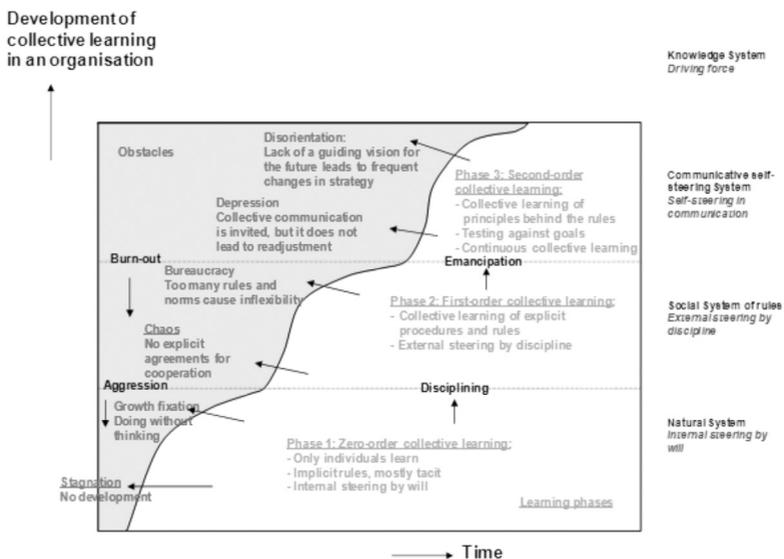


Figure 2: Development of collective learning in an organization

6 Wierdsma (2004) see his chapter 'Beyond implementation. Co-creation in Change and Development, in the book 'Dynamics of Organizational Change and Learning', Edited by Jaap J. Boonstra.

7 Wierdsma (2004)

8 Cornelis (1993)

ing like Chris Argyris and André Wierdsma. For this article, I have tweaked Wierdsma's "fixations" into "obstacles". The ascending line in figure 2 traces the construction of the ideal situation, which will naturally differ from organization to organization. The left arrows indicate the learning obstacles that may occur in a particular phase of development. For each phase, I will provide a description of the ideal situation and of the learning obstacles that may occur in that phase.

### 3.1 Phase I: Development of the Natural System: growth through will

The organization is geared to growth by doing – that is, the capacities and internal will power of the relevant persons are decisive. Unconscious experiences in relationships, such as power relations and character attributes play a major role. There are often still only a few explicit rules of play. In the ideal situation, management pays attention to the staff. People feel "at home", as if they belong there. The working conditions are such that people feel safe in the organization.

Learning obstacles in the Natural System are:

1. *Stagnation*: If there is too little will, growth will stagnate. This can occur because people are afraid to make mistakes, are unsure, or do not feel at ease. The prevalent feeling is fear of new steps.
2. *Growth fixation*: If there is too much will, people run the risk of being crushed under the weight of their own drive for growth because things are not well-organized. On the other hand, work may get bogged down in a power struggle due to political games that do not contribute to collective development. The prevalent feeling is aggression, which manifests itself in a strong drive.

In this phase, the collective does not learn. Cornelis calls this 'zero-order' learning because, for the collective, the degree of freedom to choose is zero. Those with power determine what must be done. Individuals can indeed choose. They can start a power struggle or leave the organization. Learning obstacles in Natural Systems have everything to do with status and losing face. Deviant behavior can be very

threatening to others and can result in counteraction, which precludes lasting application of what has been learned. The story you tell must fit in with “That’s how we do things here.” Stagnation and growth fixation can cause the premature death of the organization.

### **3.2 Phase 2: Development of the Social Rule System: professionalization via discipline**

As an organization is further developed, good agreements are needed to enable collaboration for efficient operational management. These can range from simple working agreements and administrations to complex management and information systems, depending on the nature and size of the organization. People make explicit rules and structures regarding operational management and required professional skills. If everything is in place, rules and structures are also regularly checked for proper functioning. The cycle of planning and steering is born. The collective learns to deal with the explicit rules. The drive for development from the Natural System is steered by the discipline of the Social Rule System. If everything is in place, then people will have the feeling that they are working in a just and well-organized organization.

Learning obstacles in the Social Rule System are:

3. *Chaos*: If there is too little discipline for making good agreements or fulfilling them, people do not learn to work together efficiently. A great deal of time and energy is spent looking for information and reinventing the wheel. Things are not organized correctly, and people are treated unfairly. This causes anger.
4. *Bureaucracy*: There is too much discipline. People cannot break away from the existing procedures and rule systems. New ideas do not get a chance because they do not fit in with the existing norms. If there are problems, people grasp for still more planning and steering, more procedures and more analyses of the structures. They do not get any further than learning the existing norms. The prevalent feeling is oppression due to the restrictions from an excess of rules.

This phase features ‘first-order learning’ for the collective. This phase is concerned with avoiding mistakes made in the past by making and adjusting rules and systems to complete the cycle of plan-do-check-act.

Learning obstacles in the Social Rule System have everything to do with justice, namely just design and application of rules for allocation of staff and resources. If a large group of people feels they are being treated unfairly, there will be a great deal of anger. Over time, the entire collective could regress back to phase 1. In this case, the conflict is no longer being resolved in accordance with the agreed-upon rules in the Social Rule System, but rather via interpersonal violence (physical or verbal) in the Natural System.

### **3.3 Phase 3: Development of self-steering: coming to fruition via communication**

To become and remain the desired organization in the face of changing circumstances requires innovation. The more possibilities people can see and avail themselves of as a collective, the better they can follow a meaningful course as an organization. However, innovation requires the willingness to revise the existing situation and the existing rules of play. This calls for collective development of reflection and communication capabilities. This is especially important because the rules of play from the Natural System, i.e. the internal Logic of “That’s how we do things here” is largely unconscious. In an organization with a System for Communicative Self-steering, people feel recognized for their contribution to the organization and people feel like they are doing meaningful work. Now we have ‘second-order collective learning’: people collectively learn not only rules, but also steering of the learning process.

Learning obstacles in the System for Communicative Self-steering are:

5. *Depression*: There is, in fact, communication regarding the state of affairs, but this does not result in readjustment. People say one thing and do another. People do not feel like they are being tak-

en seriously. Rules are, in fact, being evaluated, but no insight is gained into the principles behind the rules. People do feel “at home”, operational management is well-organized, but people feel like they are busy with the wrong things. New ideas do not get the recognition they deserve. This depresses people. In severe cases, this results in burnout or even self-destruction.

6. *Disorientation*: A great deal of reflection and communication takes place and the course is drastically changed on a regular basis. Reorganizations, change projects, and system implementations come one after another. Consultants are in and out, and a new development project starts as the last one is ending. Due to all the course changes, substantial goals are not attained. People get frustrated and distressed because they are always taking on something new and because there is no shared vision for a meaningful future.

If an organization gets bogged down in communication and reflection and the direction does not mesh with what people as a whole think is vital, then lasting frustrations can cause the entire organization to acquire destructive tendencies and regress to phase 2.

To conclude, this model describes three consecutive stages in organizational maturation. Each stage has a different fundamental driver. The model explains how, at each stage, different obstacles to learning and growth can emerge. These obstacles can cause frictions and regression in organizations. The model helps us to understand why emotions such as fear, anger and grief are indicators of different obstacles at different layers of the model, i.e. of different maturation stages.

*Learning obstacles in the Natural System have everything to do with status and losing face. Different behavior can be very threatening to others and result in counteraction, which precludes lasting application of what has been learned. The story you tell must fit in with “That’s how we do things here.”*

*Example: A manager comes back from a management development training session. Staff reaction: “Oh, looks like he’s been to training again. Things will be back to normal soon (or else we’ll see to it that they are).”*

## 4 Guidelines for managers and consultants

The sections below provide guidelines for:

- Detecting learning obstacles
- An HRM strategy for each learning obstacle
- Intervention methods for approaching learning obstacles

The Logic of Will, Discipline, and Communication provides a foothold for detecting learning obstacles as well as a strategy for approaching them. See table 1.

A child takes up everything it can process in the learning phase it is in. The same goes for the learning process in organizations. The intervention method must fit in with the organization's phase of development.

Table 1: Guidelines for identifying and approaching learning obstacles

Question on organization's (or unit's) collective learning level	obstacle	symptoms	approach	methods focusing on
1. Do persons involved have enough will to develop themselves?	<b>stagnation</b> due to lack of will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– fear, uncertainty</li> <li>– people do not feel at ease, do not dare to take initiatives</li> </ul>	<p>Reinforce internal steering: ensure that people feel "at home" and motivated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– personal performance</li> <li>– team building</li> <li>– ecology of the workplace</li> <li>– working conditions</li> <li>– recruitment and selection</li> </ul>
yes ↓ individual learning, collective does not learn; focused on experiential knowledge □	<b>aggression</b> due to too much will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– aggressive energy</li> <li>– a lot of political games</li> <li>– acting without thinking</li> </ul>	<p>decrease internal steering: improve relations and manage aggression</p>	
2. Is there enough discipline to make and fulfill good working agreements?	<b>chaos</b> due to lack of discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– anger, confusion</li> <li>– little cohesion due to lack of rules for collaboration</li> <li>– agreements are not made or are not fulfilled</li> <li>– constant reinvention of the wheel</li> </ul>	<p>reinforce external steering: professionalize organization, develop discipline</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– management development geared towards discipline</li> <li>– HRM systems</li> <li>– employment conditions and salary structure</li> <li>– on-the-job training simulations</li> <li>– auditing provisions</li> </ul>
yes ↓ first order learning collective learning of procedures and rules; focusing on existing knowledge ↓	<b>rigidity</b> due to too much discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– oppression, rigidity</li> <li>– excessive organization, desire to regulate everything</li> <li>– much analysis and production of "paper tigers", but sticks to existing norms and systems</li> </ul>	<p>decrease external steering: get flexible, de-bureaucrization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– management training focusing on communication and reflection</li> <li>– intervention</li> <li>– involve environment</li> <li>– gaming</li> </ul>

<p>3. Are the rules of play tested against the organization's objectives? yes ↓ second order learning spirit of the rules, insight into principles; focused on new learning processes ↓ people feel actualized, collective learning results in effective and meaningful organization</p>	<p><b>depression</b> due to lack of communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- depression people are invited to share ideas, but do not feel that they are taken seriously</li> <li>- communication and reflection do not result in new insights</li> <li>- collective agreements are made, but are executed differently or not at all</li> </ul>	<p>reinforce communicative self-steering: develop capacity for reflection and communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- develop servant leadership</li> <li>- Learning History</li> <li>- Large Scale Interventions</li> <li>- non-traditional meetings</li> </ul>
<p>no, too little →</p>	<p><b>disorientation</b> due to too much communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- frustration, distress, "It's something different every time!"</li> <li>- lack of vision with direction</li> <li>- a lot of consultants in and out, one change project after another</li> </ul>	<p>interactive vision development, promote creativity and decision making skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- visions for the future with Large Scale Interventions</li> <li>- empowerment</li> <li>- visitation</li> </ul>

#### 4.1 Removing obstacles in the Natural System

Obstacles in the Natural System involve people's internal steering, social relationships, drive, and working conditions. Methods that are suitable here focus on:

- Promotion of individual performance
- Adjustment of working conditions so that people feel safe
- Improvement of relationships via team building, organizational constellations, etc.
- Development of people's knowledge
- Ensuring that the proper capacities are present in the organization via recruitment and selection, outplacement, etc.

##### *Non-rational work forms for integration of experiential knowledge*

*Experiences stick in your head better if you feel personally involved in them, if they are about your own principles and assumptions. Practice has shown that an experience is integrated better if our "tacit knowledge" is called on. Associative and creative work forms are better suited for this than strictly rational work forms. Examples of non-rational work forms are the use of cartoons in lieu of reporting back to the group with reports, working with actors (and I do not mean a lot of bells and whistles to "liven up" the day), role playing, music, telling stories in which the participants play an active role.*

A learning activity for individual persons does not produce added value for the organization unless a connection is made with effective actions in one's own daily work. For this, you can ask yourself how knowledge gets linked to action in a training session/workshop/seminar (see boxes with examples).

#### 4.2 Removing obstacles in the Social Rule System

Obstacles in the Social Rule System concern professionalization of the collaboration, and the discipline to seek out ways to use qualities from the Natural System in an efficient and just manner. Methods that are suitable here are:

- Management development focusing on professionalization and discipline

- Implementation of management systems and auditing provisions
- On-the-job training, simulations
- Development of strategic human resources management
- Using training and education effectively, providing managers with quality criteria.

### ***From events to training programs***

*Organizing before and after programs around a training period (even for one-off sessions, such as a one-day training session, workshop, conference, or study day) increases the chances of added value. In this way, participants are invited to think about their goals and how they would like to take away something to use in their daily work. Some methods to promote embedding of training activities:*

- *Ask to bring an object that symbolizes the present, tell a story*
  - *Take the future as a guide: what would you like to be doing in the future?*
  - *Organize a before and/or after program on the Internet (add reactions, collect applications, encourage application and sharing of experiences)*
  - *Keep a logbook starting from the initial announcement up to a time to be further specified after the session*
  - *Make a learning history (see below under methods) with the organization(s) involved*
  - *Lunch meeting for discussion with colleagues*
  - *Reunions, refresher courses*
  - *Intervision groups and after-training maintenance*
  - *Appoint a coach within the organization*
  - *Short amount of time between program and application (how is it integrating with work)*
- In-company training as a change strategy*

## **4.3 Removing obstacles in the System of Communicative Self-steering**

Removing obstacles in the System of Communicative Self-steering involves organizing innovation by interacting across existing boundaries. This must result in meaningful steering of the strategic course. Methods that are suitable here are:

- Development of a leadership style that enables self-steering
- Interactive strategic development with stakeholders
- Development of visions of the future along with stakeholders
- Organizing non-traditional meetings by inviting internal and external stakeholders
- Development of capabilities for reflection and effective communication, for instance with a Learning History (see box), or Large Scale Interventions (see section below)
- Introduction of non-traditional approach, such as creative and associative work forms in meetings

### ***Learning History***

*A Learning History is a method for bringing learning in an organization into focus and evaluating it. It is a story told collectively. History is made by people who are or were involved in it, preferably by external parties as well such as trainers, partners in collaboration, and stakeholders. Thus, a learning history is both a product and a process in which collective meaning is given to (learning) experiences. This is important because initially it is not the sensemaking that is shared, but the experience of the collective action<sup>9</sup>.*

## **5 Organizing interaction across boundaries**

### **5.1 Large Scale Interventions: Working with the whole system in the room**

The often-heard remark “But you simply cannot enter into discussion with 500 people!” is unwarranted. The number of participants need not hinder effective interaction. The approach with Large Scale Intervention (LSI) features a method for working with an entire system (organization and stakeholders). This approach is excellently suited to organizing interactive and collective learning capability. Features of an LSI project are:

- Visions of the past, present, and future are explored, because these determine our behavior. This provides a connection to the personal (working) reality

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Weick (1995) in his book *Sensemaking in organizations*. You can download information on the application and creation of learning histories at [www.learninghistories.net](http://www.learninghistories.net).

- No distinction is made between thinking and doing
- An issue is viewed in the dynamic of its context, in the organization and outside it (system thinking)
- Stakeholders are involved in the preparation and execution of the project
- A non-traditional arrangement of participants in work meetings; the participants are a reflection of the diversity of relevant disciplines, committees, and external stakeholders
- At one or more points in the project, we work with the entire system (or a representation thereof) in one room: the Large Scale Intervention

The way you look at the organization, i.e. from what steering system, determines the focus of the (learning) activities. Table 2 shows what this means for conventional conferences and Large Scale Interventions.

**Table 2: Differences between conventional conferences and Large Scale Interventions**

Conventional conference	Large scale intervention
Viewed from Social Rule System	Viewed from System for Communicative Self-steering
Preparation by a group of managers with the consultant, or by a consultant.	Preparation with a cross-section of the system (preferably with external parties present) in question.
Mainly talking <u>about</u> change	Changing in the here-and-now.
Employees from the work floor are left at home. You need not bother them with strategic issues.	Everyone who is involved in the problem or issue is invited. There is a lot of knowledge on the work floor.
Mainly discussion and debate. One person is right and the other is not, and differences are regarded as problems.	Everyone's truth is true. Learning from each other's vision and perspective in dialog. Differences in vision are positive and contribute to collective learning.
The content of the issue is paramount. Focus lies primarily on problem/solution and making plans, which are later implemented by others.	The (emotional) meaning of the topic is just as important as the content. Focuses on creation of a collective system of knowledge regarding past, present, and future, and the path to realizing the future.

Conventional conference	Large scale intervention
The conference is led by a powerful president, who can manage the process and run the show.	A consultant facilitates the meeting and ensures that the group is functioning well.
Incentives, games, and all kinds of bells and whistles are needed to make the conference enjoyable for the participants.	Learning from each other, or the development of a collective system of knowledge, is fun and energizing in and of itself. Bells and whistles would disrupt the process.
The conference can stand on its own. The main thing is that we had 'a good discussion' or that it produced a list of resolutions	The conference makes up an inseparable part of a whole, which is transparent for everyone and grounded on a number of principles.

Methods following LSI principles, such as Open Space, World Café, and Search Conference can be applied to develop a shared vision of the setup of a learning/change process<sup>10</sup>.

## 5.2 The zone of discomfort

Communicative self-steering is an ongoing process and is not always pleasant. André Wierdsma<sup>11</sup> talks about finding the “zone of discomfort, where temporarily workable agreements can be made”. Self-steering is a learning process wherein the objective must be revised in the moment, but can only be understood afterwards. Insight into the nature of learning obstacles in the organization offers points of departure for managers and consultants to select an approach that fits in with where the organization stands. This contributes to the realization of a successful and meaningful organization, the kind we so desperately need in order to face the challenging issues of our century in health care, education, and the sustainable development of our environment.

<sup>10</sup> You can find more information on Large Scale Interventions in the online LSI practice book at [www.largescaleinterventions.com](http://www.largescaleinterventions.com). You can find an example of LSI projects and a practical guide for application in the book “Building an evidence based guide to Large Scale Interventions. Towards sustainable change with the whole system.” Tonnie van der Zouwen (2011)

<sup>11</sup> Wierdsma (2004)

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