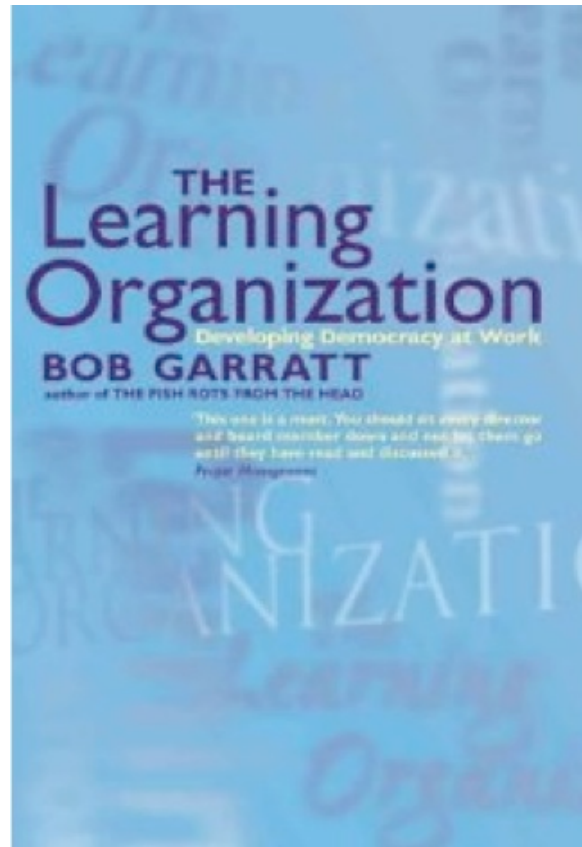# A Personal History of the Development of the Learning Organization Concept[1]

Despite popular belief the Learning Organization idea did not start in the UK or US in the 1980s. It has moral and scientific roots which go back deep into history. By the end of the Second World War the work of Reg Revans, Fritz Schumacher, and Jacob Bronowski under the supervision of Sir Geoffrey Vickers formed the Intelligence Unit of the newly nationalized National Coal Board in the UK. They created at individual, workgroup and organizational levels a system of `action learning' processes — the engine that drives the Learning Organization. Their design for dynamic learning processes was influenced also by a fundamental rethinking of economics which led later to the publication of the influential text *Small is Beautiful.* Their use of small self-managing groups, the rigorous collection of statistical data and the power generated by tapping the group's positive energies for and commitment to change was not recognized at the time as the intellectual breakthrough in organizational learning, thought and practice that it was. Similar processes were developed, but in a more limited way, by Juran and Deming's work on quality assurance and statistical methods in Japan during the late 1940s. Whereas Revans' work led to `learning circles' the Japanese Productivity Council, allied to Juran and Deming's work, led to the explosive development of `quality circles'.

---

[1] from *The Learning Organisation: Developing Democracy at Work,* pages 119 - 122 by Bob Garratt. 2000. London: Harper Collins

Fundamental to such thinking was the idea that the application of the scientific process — of careful observation, reflection, the creation of a hypothesis, careful experimentation, reflection leading to action, feedback, codification and rapid diffusion of the results — was the key to understanding organizational learning. As they moved into the early 1950s organizational theorists were able to call on complementary disciplines to back up their work, especially `systems thinking' particularly Ashby's thoughts on the need for sufficient diversity" — and the Tavistock Institute's pioneering work on `socio-technical systems'.

This promising start was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by a surprisingly fallow period for the development of organizational learning ideas. This coincided with the rise of the inaptly named `scientific management' school of academics and consultants who became dominant in US and UK business and in the emerging business schools. These thrived on a more `Newtonian' notion of a fixed universe with immutable laws within which all human problems were reduced to a single answer through the application of logic and rationality and with the answer being delivered in almost exclusively financial terms. The rise of `rationalist' managers and accountants unbalanced (in a dangerously negative way) our notions of what constitutes a healthy human organization. In the US only the humanistic psychologists, particularly Abraham Maslow, David McGregor, Carl Rogers and Roger Harrison and later Charles Hampden-Turner, kept the flag flying. They were supported by the cybernetician Norbert Wiener whose influential book *The Human Use* of *Human Beings* remains a classic.

The two new UK business schools at London and Manchester were strongly influenced by US rationalist ideology but the dominance of this was tempered by the appointment of more holistic and humane thinkers about organizations. Included in this list of honour are Reg Revans, Charles Handy, John Morris, Tom Lupton, and Stafford Beer. As an aside it was Charles Handy and John Morris who encouraged my move from architecture and community development education into the world of organizations and business.

These people pursued in their different ways the importance of learning as a central organizational process, and of the need for a series of integrated levels of learning in any healthy organization.

The earliest and clearest model was Revans' `systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma' although many did not recognize this at the time, not least because he was working outside the US/UK academic world in Belgium. His return to prominence in the UK was aided by Lord Weinstock at the General Electric Company (GEC) in 1974. Revans was asked to design and launch the GEC *Developing Senior Managers Programme.* A team of action learning facilitators led by Jean Lawrence and David Casey and including David Sutton, Alan Lawlor, Tony Eccles, Ian Cunningham and myself was brought in. They were supported inside the GEC by Mike Bett, David Pearce, Geoff Gaines, John Shrigley, Hugh Allen and Glynn Trollope. Over the next five years this team had a major effect on the UK's understanding of how beneficial

action learning processes could be for an organization. This was a defining moment for establishing the credibility of organizational learning as a business tool.

By the late 1970s action learning ideas were evolving within and between groups of enthusiasts especially in the UK and the `Learning Organization' movement began to pick up speed. My colleague Tony Hodgson and I worked informally on the dynamic interplay of learning at the policy, strategy, and operational levels which led later to my 'triple-loop learning' model of the Learning Organization which became the basis for the original version of this book.[59] Similar notions of interacting levels of organizational learning were developing in the US with the work of Weick, with Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch with their book *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* and with Chris Argyris, whose work became highly influential in the design of Learning Organizations through his ideas on 'double-loop learning'. In the UK, the work of the `Trans-Pennine group', especially Mike Pedler, Tom Boydell, Malcolm Leary, John Burgoyne and David Megginson and the emergence of the Learning Company model further developed the credibility of organizational learning in both practice and academia.

Peter Senge's internationally influential *The Fifth Discipline* published at the start of the 1990s gave the Learning Organization movement massive publicity and reinforced the notion of systems thinking as an important component to organizational learning, reflecting the work of Norbert Wiener nearly forty years before. Many new publications expanded this theme, including the work of David Garvey, Arie de Geus's *The Living Company,* the work on `dilemmas' by Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, Max Boisot's *Knowledge Assets,* and my own work on `the Learning Board' as the central integrator and processor of the Learning Organization — published in *The Fish Rots from the Head.* As new work on complexity theory is put forward (especially from the Santa Fe Institute) we come up-to-date with this personal history of the progression of the idea of the Learning Organization.

By definition organizational learning is a dynamic process in which ideas will keep evolving. Complexity theory and the impact of the Internet — particularly e-commerce — will lead us into the next millennium. The advances in digital information management systems pose us great opportunities to encourage more rigorous organizational learning, as shown in Bill Gates' book *Business @ the Speed Of Thought.* His central thesis is the importance of the `digital nervous system' of an organization and is, if you strip out the word `digital', little different from what Revans and his colleagues were advocating back in the 1940s. However the technology to achieve it is now much more effective. The crucial questions are still: do we have the imagination and values to commit to true organizational learning; and will we be willing to transfer sufficient power within and between organizations to do this democratically?