

The Learning Organization

Lessons for the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources
A Constructionist and Exploratory Approach

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Abstract

This paper applies the concept and theory of the Learning Organization to elicit a better understanding of the attitudes, vocabulary, behaviour patterns, belief systems and technologies that make organizations work. Arguing that “theories-in-use” must harmonize with the organization’s “espoused theories” (as set forth in a code of ethics or standards of practices), the author applies the theory of the Learning Organization in the context of the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (CAVR), and raises a series of “wicked questions,” which elicit deliberation and analysis; clarify the dynamics of individual and organizational learning; help break down barriers, fixed attitudes and defence mechanisms in organizational culture; raise awareness of obstacles to innovation; and encourage experimentation leading to daring and original solutions to persistent problems. This offers CAVR a repertoire of tools for organizational development through continuous learning. This paper will be of interest to other emergent organizations whose complexity may no longer allow the advantages of traditional, centralized leadership.

Introduction

This document deals with the Learning Organization. Interest in this theme originated from two observations: the first is that human beings, from birth onward, are in a constant state of learning. Indeed the process lasts throughout life – from our first steps, to the acquisition of language, to the development of new working and leisure skills and the honing of psychological abilities in our personal lives. The second observation emerges from the fact that the ability to learn is born of self-knowledge. As Socrates stated, “Know thyself.” This transformative knowledge, which enables individuals and organizations to develop to the highest degree, requires the ability, the will and the courage to confront convictions, ideas, attitudes and reflexes, acquired at a young age, which mould our personal programming. Thus, self-knowledge is the hub of our lifelong learning.

In this paper, I intend to offer the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (CAVR) and other organizations in the voluntary sector an opportunity to engage in a reflection on the vast potential for transformation that organizations possess through awareness of the issues and challenges in the field of knowledge. The potential for growth is enormous and untapped. The issues are crucial for CAVR, as this transformation will guarantee a stronger leadership role for our network within the voluntary sector.

The literature studied in the course of this work does not refer specifically to the voluntary or nonprofit sector. However, the analysis and thinking that my reading inspired apply to all concepts of organizations and structures through which individuals endeavour to bring the vision of their enterprise to life.

This paper will examine the theory and ideas presented in literature on the Learning Organization by transposing them into the organizational life of CAVR. The objective of the work is to elicit ongoing deliberation and analysis so that organizational behaviours are less subject to barriers, fixed attitudes and defence mechanisms. Our “*theories-in-use*” must harmonize more with our organization’s “*espoused theories*” of respect and authenticity as set forth in our Code of Professional Ethics (see p. 40).

The ideas presented in the McGill-McConnell Program also inspired this study. Professor Parker Palmer’s concept of “abundance” certainly applies to my subject; its strength lies in the extraordinary stimulating effect of this mindset on leadership in particular. The concept of courage in our discussions with Professor Fred Bird on *moral blindness, muteness and deafness* also contributed to my thinking. “*Wicked questions*” and Professor Italo Magni’s ideas on *storytelling* likewise feature prominently in these pages.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to present the concept and theory of the Learning Organization as a way of better understanding the attitudes, vocabulary, behaviour patterns, belief systems and technologies that make organizations work. Throughout the discussions, I seek to apply this knowledge to the organizational life of the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (CAVR) by posing “wicked questions” – questions that reveal self-fulfilling prophecies – to open the way to experimentation and create favourable conditions under which to challenge the established order of our thinking patterns that inhibits our thought processes. Obstacles along the way will be used to explore little-known terrain and to find original solutions to persistent problems. Wicked questions are particularly useful when the polarization of ideas binds the members of a group to their positions. Such questions create the space required to investigate less ossified and more daring scenarios.

The intention is for CAVR to accomplish the following:

- Include these “wicked questions” in its strategic thinking
- Develop a questioning culture as opposed to a reactive culture
- Insert continuous, authentic and iterative questioning into its organizational practices
- Promote the quest of informative and useful meaning
- Cultivate the ability to learn and ensure our organizational vitality and dynamism

Our thinking also includes exploratory pathways towards the achievement of our common goals, now and in the future.

Main Themes

This paper covers the following themes:

- What is a Learning Organization? Why do we need one?
- How do organizations learn? How do individuals learn?
- The characteristics and challenges of the Learning Organization
- Leadership: the “leader of men” as opposed to the “leader of change”?
- The moral foundations of the Learning Organization
- Technology and the Learning Organization
- Storytelling: another dimension of the Learning Organization
- The creation of Societies for Organizational Learning (SOLs) for the nonprofit sector

1

The Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (CAVR)

The Context

Canadian Administrators of Voluntary Resources (CAVR) is a Canada-wide network of 300 professionals who manage volunteer programs and resources in several types of organizations: health facilities, cultural infrastructures (such as museums), community organizations, municipal services, etc. Their work generally includes administrative responsibilities, such as recruitment, selection, training, support and recognition for volunteers who wish to get involved with institutions in their communities. Other professional activities include building relationships and partnerships within different milieux, as well as advocacy work and teaching.

To some extent, CAVR is a “virtual” organization, without paid staff or permanent offices. Its operating budget consists of annual membership fees exclusively. The Board of Directors is elected at annual general meetings, and the Executive Committee implements the strategic plan. Promotion, member certification, the application of training standards and building relationships with provincial organizations are accomplished and supported through the physical, technological and human resources of our respective organizations.

CAVR and Its Environment

CAVR is developing in an environment undergoing major change in Canada. Let us first describe the structural environment of the sector of management of volunteer resources in Canada. Although CAVR is countrywide, strong and active provincial organizations are also a feature of the Canadian scene. Some of these bring together only administrators of

volunteer resources from the health care field, while others welcome a broader membership base.

For example, this is the case for the Provincial Administrators of Volunteer Resources of Ontario (PAVRO) whose membership is larger than that of CAVR. Members of the provincial associations are free to join the national network, although there are no formal links between these groups.

Some organizations, such as the Association of Volunteer Administrators (AVA), whose head office is in Michigan, include both Canadian and American administrators. The International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE) has an international membership, while the Points of Light Foundation is based in Washington, DC. Volunteer Canada is exclusively Canadian. Several major players would like to represent volunteer resource administrators in Canada. Since “volunteer resource management” is not currently part of their mission, some associations are going to great lengths to stake out territory on this side of the border. Volunteer resource management is the new frontier to conquer.

The Canadian nonprofit sector is in a state of flux. In view of its constricting fiscal responsibilities, the Canadian government is making the volunteer field a fully-fledged partner alongside corporations and the government itself. In 1999, the report *Working Together: A Government of Canada/Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative* set forth common points of interest between the voluntary sector and the government. Following this report, in June 2000 the federal government announced implementation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), which defined issues of cooperation, common objectives, and action plans to attain them. Accordingly, in the spring of 2000, the federal government announced the creation of a \$95-million fund, spread over a five-year period, to buttress the voluntary sector. This flurry of activity reflects the effervescence of the sector with its 175,000 charitable organizations. The reinforcement of volunteer resources also involves sound and informed management of human capital. Hence the crucial role of organizations dedicated to the management of volunteer resources.

In addition, the voluntary sector is faced with major challenges resulting from its mission and the place volunteerism occupies in a world seeking increasingly to redefine civil society's role in an active democracy. It must meet considerable organizational

challenges that entail re-examination of the nature, issues, objectives and strategic advantages of the Learning Organization.

CAVR and Its Challenges

There are many different challenges facing CAVR. Among other things, the organization must

- learn more about and document volunteerism and its proper management as value added in Canadian society
- raise public awareness, especially among employers, about the type of work the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources does
- promote and inform employers about our network's member certification program
- mobilize Canadian partners in education around training for administrators of volunteer resources
- create partnerships with provincial associations around training, standardization of practices, promotion of the profession, lobbying and participation by administrators of volunteer resources in round tables such as the Voluntary Sector Initiative
- create a culture of the Learning Organization
- analyze and understand the organizational barriers that keep CAVR and its management from becoming a genuine Learning Organization
- realize this "actionable knowledge" through concrete initiatives in order to provide CAVR with the right strategic tools to develop an informed vision that "carries the message"

2

The Learning Organization: A Strategic Interest for CAVR

Why should CAVR take an interest in the concept of the Learning Organization? Several considerations come to mind.

First, a word of caution. People can't simply decide to call their organization a "Learning Organization," and let it go at that. An organization in the process of evolving and learning requires its members to share a commitment to progress in knowledge – a mindset that perceives learning as an ongoing process.

Second, there is the matter of competition. While maintaining a competitive edge may not be the primary purpose of the typical Canadian voluntary sector organization, the fact remains that many nonprofit organizations operate within a world of economic uncertainty, dependence upon external resources and power struggles. In this context, organizations must develop survival strategies to meet the demands of various publics, including members and donors. An organization's ability to stand out from the competition by meeting people's needs promptly, delivering quality services or representing its members' interests will depend primarily on its willingness to learn and to encourage new ideas.

Third, organizations can no longer depend on a single head strategist, or on a steering committee or board of directors, to find solutions. Many perspectives and points of view are required for greater intercultural, pluralistic and inclusive efficiency. Organizations must expand their capacity to comprehend and learn at all levels.

Fourth, organizations that rely on teamwork should revive the Learning Organization experiment, particularly in situations where the group's objectives come ahead of individual goals and teams build trust by complementing each other and through friendly cooperation. Individuals seek to derive more than monetary gain from their work. Their

aspirations carry them toward a sense of higher self-realization. Organizational leadership wishes to tap into this energy in a work situation. As one leader said, “We have an extraordinary opportunity to bring about social change, but we must first eliminate the barriers that hinder our progress as visionaries and restrict our ability to learn.”

Last but not least, our organizations’ entrenched attitudes and defence mechanisms generate cynicism, vulnerability and doubt about our ability to produce change. We are living in a world that reinforces processes that counteract learning. They become the *modus operandi* of our organizations by overprotecting the players and hampering the detection and correction of our mistakes.

In recent years, the growth and evolution of CAVR have favoured important operational actions, including the creation of a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, revision of the professional certification program, participation in a consulting process prior to implementing a training program in Canada and the publication of a brochure promoting the management of volunteer resources. These actions help to position the network and raise its visibility. However, resistance to learning is still simmering. Withdrawal into defensive strategies, the difficulty in grasping reality in a systemic manner, the tendency to weld the individual to his position, the “boiled frog” syndrome that hinders problem detection, as well as self-fuelling thought patterns represent obstacles for CAVR.

These attitudes lie at the root of the challenge to be met by our management team. Several questions must be asked. Can we re-examine the nature of our thought process, our interaction, our defence or indictment of others? Are we interested and prepared to examine our thought processes? Are we ready to adapt our convictions and behaviour patterns and bring them into line with our Standards of Practice? Are we committed to maintaining personal and collective sustainable change to realize our organization’s vision, to foster our members’ professional advancement, and ultimately, to reinforce the voluntary sector and Canadian civil society? Finally, are we ready to assume responsible and ethical leadership and become an operational model in the voluntary sector in Canada?

3

The Nature of a Learning Organization

Before going further, let us first see what other writers think of the nature of Learning Organizations and of the general context of organizational learning.

In *The Fifth Discipline* (1990, 3) Peter Senge claims that Learning Organizations are those “where individuals continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire.” Having broken through their passivity, they no longer regard world forces fatalistically as something over which they have little influence.

In *On Organizational Learning* (1999, xiii), Chris Argyris asserts that the more organizations are “learning,” the better they are equipped to detect and correct mistakes and recognize opportunities or moments of indifference.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1998, 85–89) maintain that Japanese organizations have enjoyed success due to their ability and expertise in creating organizational knowledge. They are particularly efficient in producing continual, growing and iterative innovations while transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Grieves and Brian (1997, 89) assert that if service organizations (hospitals, schools, professional organizations) are not “learning,” they lose knowledge of their clients’ needs as well as of their market.

How Organizations Learn

How do organizations learn? The answer to this question varies from author to author. Thus, Watkins and Marsik (1993, 266) maintain that organizational learning consists mainly of “social” activities. By working together, people learn to reach objectives in which they participate. Individuals help each other in their learning and support groups,

which ultimately influence the entire organization. Shared meaning is created and a common vision emerges among suppliers, customers and even families and the community. Learning becomes collective and interrelational.

Dixon (2000, 44) states that learning results from three spheres of interrelated activity: individual learning, team learning and systemic learning. The latter is based on the development of internal processes that facilitate the acquisition, utilization and communication of organizational learning.

Quoting a Soviet psychologist, Cullen (1999, 43) confirms that the social character of learning is more important than the personal aspect. Thus, learning is acquired through others, dialogue becoming a major component of learning, and cultural practices (beliefs, practices and values) are defined through social contacts.

As for Nonaka and Takeuchi, they maintain that the tacit knowledge of individuals is the basis for creating organizational knowledge (1997, 85).

In a 1983 *Journal of Management Studies* article entitled “A typology of organizational learning systems,” P. Shrivastava (quoted in Hong 1999, 76), made an important distinction between individual-centred learning systems, which uphold the ideas and insights of management (i.e., the CEO) and organization-centred learning systems, which favour interaction between individuals.

These observations on the “why” and “how” of the Learning Organization bring into relief the deeply social character of our organizational lives. The influences we bring to bear on each other are profound and benefit existing operational structures, such as program or budget committee meetings. Yet creative thought, deployed through a constructionist point of view, could lead to new ways of thinking and, in turn, be recognized for its shaping and influential force.

Wicked Questions:

- **If CAVR were to assess its real capacity to influence, which partnerships would it envision? What type of “connective” action would it promote?**

-
- **CAVR is defined as a service organization that offers its members a certification program. Consequently, if the service were not delivered, it would disappear. What opportunities exist to make innovations, identify aspects of member services that could be improved, learn from clients and cooperate with competitors?**

Some experts reproach authors in the field of the Learning Organization for their tendency to be dogmatic. Thus Miller, Greenwood and Hinnings (1999, 162) argue against the principles of Senge and Kanter, who advocate that organizations should constantly reinvent themselves, react promptly, become “organic” and eliminate strata in the hierarchical pyramid. These normative authors most often ignore the difficulties related to change, like gender and cultural values. Caution and humility are therefore recommended in discussing organizational change.

We believe that these normative writers offer solution tracks that organizations can use at their discretion. Their suggestions have the merit of producing ideas, methods and in-depth thoughts, while remaining optional.

Wicked Questions:

- **Are there times when CAVR demonstrates too much caution and humility? What are, or what were, the effects of such hesitation? What lessons can we draw from this?**

Documenting the Characteristics of a Learning Organization

Several concerns and many facets of organizational learning emerge from the documentation on the Learning Organization. The more closely I read this material, the more apparent the real interests behind the researchers’ analyses became. The consideration of organizational learning springs from concrete and immediate measures such as quality circles and employee training programs. Its course then runs to practices taking account of the environment, such as a “client-based” approach and “standard

performance” orientation. The thought processes finally flow into an examination of attitudes, belief systems, values and organizational behaviour patterns.

It is at this third level that the most interesting levers of analysis are revealed since they examine not only the “what” and “how,” but especially the “why” of things. Chris Argyris’s “double loop” learning, Peter Senge’s systems thinking, and Peter F. Drucker’s ability to suspend judgment illustrate these tools’ power of transformation.

At this point, the schools of thought on the Learning Organization in the literature consulted will be presented, as well as the nature of the concept of the Learning Organization and points of interest. Recommendations for CAVR to consider in its strategic thinking and action will then be elaborated; and “wicked questions” will highlight the potential leverage of these elements.

Characteristics of the Learning Organization

First, while some authors present their ideas and theories in the context of private manufacturing or service companies, the Learning Organization is also relevant to individuals’ behaviour, beliefs and values in a variety of settings.

A Mindset or Deliberate Way of Being

At the outset, Grieves and Mathews, quoting Jones and Hendry, differentiate the Learning Organization from “organizational learning” (1997, 89). The Learning Organization represents a direction and mindset toward progress and evolution. This status is neither won nor acquired indefinitely. Organizational learning experiences, of course, can be described, qualified and quantified. They are what makes a *Learning Organization*.

Dialogue and Authenticity

Several authors place importance upon common characteristics of the Learning Organization – particularly the notion that dialogue and authenticity can lead to high levels of organizational learning (Bhatt 2000, 94; Borredon and Roux-Dufort 1998, 46; Dixon 2000, 43; Hodkinson 2000, 163; Senge 1990, 10).

The word “dialogue” comes from the Greek *dialogos*, indicating “meaning that flows between interlocutors.” It contrasts with the word “debate,” which refers to the notion of confrontation, or with the word “consensus,” which suggests the reaching of a general agreement. Dialogue, associated with Socrates’ search for human wisdom, is a process of questions and answers. Individuals learn gradually by replacing defensive exchanges and assumptions with questioning, research and the exchange of views. In dialogue, we learn to preserve all the diversity and differences of those present. If it is authentic, it relies on values of trust and on a climate of confidence that enhance research and exploration. The practice of dialogue encompasses the capacity to recognize patterns of defensive behaviour that undermine learning within teams. When they are brought to light in a creative manner, they become opportunities for accelerated learning.

Dixon (2000, 43) believes that the objective of dialogue is to develop cohesive values and beliefs in the organization. In metaphorical terms, it is compared to social cement leading a group to the realization of the organization’s vision or project. Dialogue requires the suspension of preconceived ideas by encouraging reflection on the ideas, emotions and actions of the group.

Suspension of Preconceived Ideas and Judgments

Garvin (2001, 93–94) asserts that the Learning Organization is made up of individuals with the capacity to acquire, provoke, interpret, transfer and retain knowledge. Above all, they must be able to consciously alter their behaviour patterns in light of newly acquired knowledge. Garvin considers this question important for Learning Organizations: “Is the organization open to discordant information?” Is there room to accommodate different points of view?

Bhatt (2000, 94) maintains that a multiplicity of points of view is necessary and useful, for it enables individuals to revise, alter and reformulate their beliefs in contact with others. Through this practice, the organization also becomes more adept at grasping the trends in its environment, solving problems and assessing the suitability of solutions for particular situations.

According to Rowden (2001, 16–17), the Learning Organization has four characteristics: constant openness to a changing environment, continuous planning, improvised implementation and knowledge through practice. He warns against prejudices based on past experience that keeps minds in “psychic prisons” by hampering the expression of a fresh outlook.

An organization’s ability to learn cannot be left to chance. It is a practice that must be planned and that starts with basic questioning on the “how” of things and events. Furthermore, in this type of organization “experiential learning” is continuous and evaluation does not occur only when crises arise. Assessment must be part of the organizational culture. Prejudgment and preconceived ideas are examined in depth so that solutions that are new, well considered, and adapted to the needs and challenges of the day are found.

Entrepreneurial Thought for New, Interconnected, Holomorphic Organizations

The organizational model in which entrepreneurship was the monopoly of a few individuals at the top of the hierarchy could function in a relatively stable and predictable world. However, it is no longer adapted to post-modern society, full of uncertainty and complexity. The concepts introduced by Emile-Michel Hernandez (2001) in his article on the “holomorphic” company mould the modern organization into an ever-changing environment. An entrepreneurial culture within organizations has become a necessity.

In CAVR, this transformation can be put into effect in different ways: CAVR can observe its environment as being attentive to unsatisfied needs; it can analyze its members’ skills; it can improve its members’ professional training and development; it can accord greater value to team work and governance; it can participate in working groups on training and

professional advocacy; it can create networks linked to specific interests; it can encourage respect for standards of professional practice; and finally, CAVR can invest effort in the existing situation, and be open to questioning and improving it.

The holomorphic enterprise transforms organizations in an entrepreneurial spirit. Its boundaries become more flexible, and notions of “within” and “without” become more permeable and dynamic. Here, we can observe a trend to “introduce the organization into the outside world/market,” and vice versa. Efforts are made to perpetuate the organization’s exchanges and relations with the outside world and to win the trust, appreciation and loyalty of the market by involving the client or by taking into account the organization’s external environment. This, then, is an organization in which each part is integral to the whole, each organization being entrepreneurial, learning and dynamic.

In the voluntary sector, according to the Hernandez model, the transformation of organizations could be achieved as follows. Besides seeking clients or members to purchase services (which ensures basic financial security), organizations could offer expertise to new categories of clients. They could then market professional development activities and strategic knowledge to other organizations in the voluntary sector.

We believe that this model can be transposed, and that CAVR could draw inspiration from it. Thus members who are also clients of the network could become entrepreneurs offering their services to the organization. The effect would be to project the organization beyond its borders. The outside world could then penetrate CAVR through a major offer of services that would win the loyalty of outside partners through the added value of the network – and an important breakthrough would be made in our way of conceiving our interrelationships with the outside environment.

Take, for example, the interest of CAVR in the Conflict Resolution Program created by a national organization recognized for its expertise in this field. CAVR has a certification program that provides training for administrators of volunteer resources in risk management when selecting reliable volunteers capable of contributing to branches’ community programs. The organization, through conferences or the CAVR Web site, offers this external expertise in conflict resolution in the form of training sessions for members of both the CAVR Board of Directors and its membership. Furthermore,

CAVR's expertise is such that several coordinators of volunteer services in the branches' community programs are interested in obtaining CAVR certification so as to upgrade their internal management of volunteer resources. Some members of the Certification Committee are becoming permanent advisers at regular meetings of the national organization, and one CAVR member has even been invited to join its Board of Directors.

Other developments are on the horizon. The computer bank of specific skills of members of CAVR is of interest to some branches of the national organization in specific regions. For example, a CAVR administrator, whose expertise is entered in the skills bank, is providing training in the "value of story telling in recruitment of volunteers," a field that interests the national organization in that region.

Wicked Questions:

- **What other entrepreneurial practices of CAVR can be envisioned to win leadership in the field of training in the Canadian voluntary sector?**
- **Should CAVR review its culture and values for stronger entrepreneurial leadership?**
- **How do these new strategic choices differ from current strategic planning?**

According to Grievies and Matthews, a service organization that is inattentive to its clients' needs may incur disastrous losses. When a service is not consumed, it disappears. It is crucial for a service organization to reduce this risk by creating more opportunities to innovate, upgrade service and learn from both clients and the competition.

Wicked Question:

- **Insofar as CAVR offers its members certification services, professional development events, management tools (Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics) also offered by other organizations, in what ways does CAVR reflect on the durability and renewal of the services offered to its members?**

An Analogy: The Hologram

The same authors present a metaphor of the Learning Organization. Like a human brain sending and receiving many interconnected messages at several levels, holomorphic organizations function flexibly. Widely separated connections enable mistakes to be corrected and simultaneous interrelations to be developed (a hologram on credit cards reflects several images, and receptors receive them differently depending on the angle of perception). The analysis process of these many messages is facilitated by the very structure and operation of the brain.

In terms of the organization, a structure that implements organic, flexible and inter-linked operations, that facilitates the gathering of information originating from several sources, that organizes it and sees that it is redirected to several other reception points represents an interesting comparison. This concept stands in contrast to the image of a pyramidal and controlling decision-making structure consisting of a restricted number of “connectors” and narrow communication channels.

Wicked Questions:

- **Is the organizational structure of CAVR, whose Executive Committee, with limited resources, puts the annual strategic plan into effect, likely to optimize holomorphic, numerous, flexible, smooth-running and informative connections?**

-
- **What role can recent technology acquired by CAVR play in considering this? Which strategic partners could help the network reflect on this operating model?**

4

Barriers and Challenges

Learning organizations face several challenges that restrict their ability to learn.

Creativity

Borredon and Roux-Dufort (1998, 46) attribute the paralysis of organizational minds to organizations' inability to recognize the arbitrariness of their beliefs and their hypotheses about the world. Although we are fascinated by complexity, we yield to the temptation to simplify and fragment that leads to paradoxical positions. While advocating the need for visionary companies, we actually create centralized organizations akin to bureaucracies. Although we recognize that crisis situations present opportunities for learning, we prefer a rapid return to the status quo rather than transformation. Although we all claim to value creativity, we nevertheless do our utmost to prove new ideas unrealistic, to the potential detriment of the persons who originate them. Powerless in the face of complexity, we refuse to recognize the limitations of our own lack of comprehension.

Peter Senge (1990, 63) proposes an initial diagnosis of the fragmentation and simplification of the relationship between cause and effect in decision making, and their distance in organizational time and space. In this diagnosis, he sees a serious syndrome that prevents administrators from recognizing and appreciating the systemic nature of the decisions they take. Other syndromes are attached to this initial diagnosis, and these will be discussed in a later section.

According to Watkins and Marsick in *Sculpting the Learning Organization* (1993, 267–68), creativity is one of the seven characteristics that define the Learning Organization. This characteristic prompts the organization to sense and predict the preferences and tastes of the community it serves. Fluidity (details and finesse), uniqueness (originality) and the frequency of new ideas measure the degree of creativity. The vitality and culture of an organization's learning can be tested by the following questions:

-
- Is the organization concerned with discovering its clientele's desires?
 - Is there an aspect of play at work?
 - Is innovation encouraged notwithstanding the return on effort (investment)?
 - Is risk taking encouraged?

Peter Senge, in a conversation with Peter F. Drucker, mentions the lack of organizational will to experiment (Drucker and Senge 2000, 19–20). Organizations are seized with paralysis that renders them incapable of taking risks although it is risk that gives rise to change.

Takeuchi and Nonaka (1997, 157–62) relate some organizations' experience in introducing a culture of innovation. The 3M company, which offers staff its resources to try out new ideas, is one example of this. Managers are responsible for welcoming ideas for new products from their employees. They are even obliged to justify their rejection of new proposals.

IBM, which almost went bankrupt due to the failure of its accounting machine for the bank market, took back control of its financial situation and future by offering its product to a different market: the libraries of the City of New York (Drucker and Senge 2000, 20).

Wicked Questions:

- **What learning opportunities has CAVR possibly lost in the last year?**
- **What are the minimum specifications that would enable the network to take advantage of its members' creativity?**

The Difference between Individual Knowledge and Organizational Learning

In an excellent article, Ganesh D. Bhatt shows that, although organizations believe that learning is crucial to maintaining excellence and to their survival, they do not understand how it is created. By juxtaposing individuals' capacity to learn with the interest and space within organizational culture for new learning, Bhatt shows that the sum of knowledge possessed by individuals within an organization does not equal organizational learning (Bhatt 2000, 90).

Knowledge is learning that has meaning (ibid.). Without meaning, learning is inert, static and unorganized. In dynamic environments, belief systems change when they cannot provide pathways to new thought. For organizations, opening up numerous different interconnected information channels makes it easier to collect and analyze critical information when new scenarios arise, and to re-examine these on an ongoing basis.

The acquisition of new knowledge is simplified insofar as members of the organization are creative and learn from each other in a cooperative and collegial manner (ibid., 93). However, obstacles to learning are inimical to organizational culture, and may affect the processes of creativity and sharing knowledge (ibid., 95). It is the duty of management to create an environment that fosters positive interaction between individuals, and as a consequence, mutual learning.

Wicked questions

- **In the case of CAVR, what lessons can the Executive Committee draw from these principles?**

- **Is the organizational structure a pretext not to engage in fruitful exchanges of views between its members?**

- **What reflection can be undertaken on creating learning for CAVR? How can creativity be turned to good account? Can we introduce the concept of**

minimum specifications to encourage and foster the development of ideas and projects?

From Individual Learning to Organizational Learning

Bhatt states that an organization's capacity to generate and analyze useful information through cooperative exchanges of views between individuals has strengthened the position of several organizations within their markets. Information sharing inside the organizations also creates positive feedback that, in turn, provides nourishment for the organizational system. Individuals thereby learn from each other in a highly interactive manner.

Organizations equipped to deal with the confusion and chaos of the environment enhance their ability to reflect and work from divergent perspectives such as brainstorming, logical argumentation and continuous experimentation. Organizational thinking is expanded by the formation of small teams that organize themselves and explore new ways of understanding new situations and taking up challenges (Bhatt 2000, 95).

The organizational culture that encourages learning and the creation of knowledge is actively concerned with its survival. However, organizations are not always skilled in utilizing individual capacities for learning and the real integration of new knowledge. Organizational culture, management attitudes and the low allocation of resources to support training often impede the acquisition of new knowledge.

Trust, respect and the desire to learn without feeling intimidated or threatened help to build organizational learning. The latter is responsive, adjustable and is built into a life context.

Bhatt uses a table (2000, 96–97) to illustrate the capacity of individual learning as it relates to organizational culture. The two axes represent the following scenarios:

Table 1. Capacity for individual learning

Culture of organizational learning	1 Appreciation of Knowledge	2 Expertise	H
	4 Failure	3 Trial of Strength	L
	L	H	

(H = high; L = low)

In cell 1, the organizational culture fosters learning, but the capacity of individuals to integrate new learning is low. The knowledge required for change is limited as the organization opts for simple solutions to recurrent problems. However, training acquired internally and externally expands the knowledge base. In the short term, the organization practices imitation; but in the long term, owing to a culture encouraging new learning, it learns to turn to feedback, experimentation and sharing knowledge. This practice generates a greater capacity for learning and the creation of new knowledge. The organization therefore emerges from this experience a winner.

In cell 2, there is a high capacity for learning and the organizational culture fosters learning. A cycle of positive feedback elicits a constant flow of ideas, information and new knowledge. Individuals are receptive to the environment and utilize this new learning to better reach their objectives. Exploration and the refinement of ideas are part of their “learning” habits.

In cell 3, the culture does not encourage learning, but individual capacity is high. This situation makes the organization vulnerable to conflicts and trials of strength over matters of training and orientation. The organizational culture attaches no importance to individuals’ knowledge, and adverse, hostile comments frequently occur. The

organization loses stability and frustrated individuals quit, endangering the future of the organization if no readjustment occurs, as shown in cell 2.

In cell 4, the culture is not encouraging, and the capacities for learning and renewal are low. These organizations do not survive, except for those that depend on homogeneous products, markets and customer preferences.

Organizational Rigidity

Managers often misunderstand the role of learning in the organization. They reject new learning since it does not fit in with existing standards and rules. Organizational rigidity hampers innovation.

The management of information is as important as the creation of information. Unlike official information sources such as annual reports, informal channels such as exchanges of view, opportunities for dialogue, comments, suggestions and criticisms from peers are favoured as ways to generate information.

Interrelational Skills

Another barrier to the emergence of a learning culture comes from what human learning, as opposed to technological learning, requires of skills in personal interaction. Many people are comfortable with synthetic, impersonal and quantitative information such as standards of practice, codes of ethics, laws and regulations. However, situations requiring work with feelings, vulnerability, emotions, beliefs and life experiences require skills at another level. Chris Argyris (1999, 127–28, 318–19) speaks of “double loop” learning, while Borredon and Roux-Dufort (1998, 43–44) speak of “triple loop” learning.

Creating, Managing and Communicating

For an organization, the capacity to learn depends on its aptitude to generate learning as well as to manage social and human relations. According to Bhatt (2000, 97), the

challenge lies in the difficulty in creating, managing and communicating information at the same time and on a regular basis. Bhatt maintains that self-managed teams formed around projects and ideas in a highly socialized context help in the development and sharing of meaningful knowledge.

Wicked Questions:

- **If members of the Executive Committee proceeded with the analysis proposed by Bhatt, what would be the end result? In which quadrant would CAVR position itself?**
- **Which arguments would members use to explain the positioning of CAVR in the quadrant corresponding to the situation?**
- **Which concrete strategies will the organization take to improve CAVR's position?**
- **If CAVR were well positioned in the Bhatt diagram, which strategic levers would be available? Are they being used to the best advantage?**
- **Are there unexplored opportunities for CAVR?**

5

The Next Level of Analysis: “We create our own reality”

This section presents, in part, the ideas of Peter Senge and Chris Argyris on organizational disabilities. It is useful for understanding unsound and infectious organizational dynamics that, if they do not change, can become entrenched and magnified, and cause the organization harm or even paralysis. For both these authors, the analysis of organizational thought processes and behaviours leads to another level of reflection affecting real, perpetual and widespread organizational disabilities since they involve the human psyche. The interest in their work lies in the exploration and recognition of symptoms and in the real possibility of reacting to them. This is what Argyris terms “actionable knowledge.” Several hidden traps exist; when exposed, however, they can become genuine strategic levers for authenticity, self-confidence and organizational growth.

The concepts advanced by these two authors will be applied to a concrete example of organizational myopia that, in the medium and long term, could prevent CAVR from playing a national role in the professional management of volunteer resources and programs in Canada.

First, Peter Senge’s series of seven learning disabilities will be defended. Four of them will be selected to illustrate internal dysfunctions. The harmful effects of defensive reactions that compromise learning capacity will be illustrated. More personal response elements based on Argyris’s concept of “double loop” learning will be suggested. Finally, Senge’s five personal disciplines and certain “wicked questions” related to them will be presented.

Peter Senge’s Seven Learning Disabilities

Peter Senge’s theory is “constructionist” in inspiration: that is, it is based on the principle that people together create their own reality. Actual facts emerge from consensus, not

from individual perceptions and opinions, and an organization's reality is decided and created by individuals who have put it together jointly. In concrete terms, an organization's future is that determined by the organization, namely a group of individuals. The Learning Organization is, in fact, one that utilizes its capacities to generate the results it really wants to obtain.

As individuals, we are all essentially "learners." Children learn instinctively. We like to learn. People who have experienced success in teamwork want to repeat the experience. They have actually experienced the Learning Organization. The team was not necessarily outstanding. The members learned to work together and to produce extraordinary results.

In fact, many organizations do not reach their full potential and are content with inadequate situations and mediocrity. The design and management of organizations, and especially the way in which we have all been trained to interact and think since childhood, generate fundamental, organizational learning disabilities (Senge 1990, 17–26). Intelligent and committed individuals are no less victims of these disabilities than are their less able, less committed co-workers.

There are seven misconceptions or illusions that create organizational learning disabilities:

1. "I am my 'job'"
2. "The enemy is elsewhere"
3. The supreme illusion: "We are proactive!"
4. Fixation on short-term events
5. The case of the "boiled frog"
6. The comforting delusion: "We learn from our experiences"
7. The myth *par excellence*: There is an all-powerful management team at the top of the hierarchy

The most important learning disabilities, however, are also those that offer the greatest potential for correction. It will be useful to repeat a few points at the start of the analysis to gain a better grasp of CAVR's challenges and possibilities for learning.

- The CAVR network consists of members who pay an annual membership fee, the only source of stable financing.
- The Executive Committee, consisting of six members, performs all the tasks described in the strategic planning (volunteer work), as well as their responsibilities as administrators of voluntary resources for their employers.
- The Executive Committee works and communicates by e-mail during the year and tries to meet once a year at annual general meetings, if that is financially possible.
- CAVR has no head office, nor any material, human or technical resources. Its vitality depends entirely on the time and energy of members of the Executive Committee and the resources of the institutions that employ them. For all practical purposes, it is almost a virtual organization, with no sponsors, no paid staff, and with a total membership of 300.

The challenges facing the network are enormous and the work accomplished remarkable. Nevertheless, learning deficiencies are apparent and they affect members' morale, pride and accomplishments. They deprive the organization of major levers of action, induce distrust and organizational myopia, and possibly mortgage the organization's future. The deficiencies are not related to limited resources but to individuals. They are therefore rectifiable. However, Bhatt's grid reminds us that individual learning is no guarantor of the Learning Organization when the organization is blind to learning.

For CAVR, the four learning disabilities that harbour the greatest potential for correction are the following:

-
1. “We are proactive!”
 2. “The boiled frog”
 3. “We learn from our experiences”
 4. “We have an all-powerful management team at the top”

These four disabilities affected our own organizational life for the last year on a specific issue. The consequences of these failings are apparent, but in our opinion, they will be felt more in the years to come. To illustrate these statements, the following occasion, specifically a meeting in Ottawa, is recounted.

Three members of the CAVR Executive Committee attended a meeting at the head office of Volunteer Canada in the fall of 2001, together with the Chair of the Board of Directors, the General Manager, an employee responsible for professional development and an institutional member (from Volunteer Centre). The objective of the meeting was to repeat an offer made two years before. Volunteer Canada was inviting CAVR to play a strategic role in their organization, thanks to our expertise in managing volunteer programs and resources – a matter of increasing interest and importance in Canada, particularly in colleges and universities. Management of volunteer programs and resources heads the list of Volunteer Canada’s spearhead efforts. The aim of this strategy is to maintain and increase this organization’s influence. Volunteer Canada is linking its mission to this expertise.

The three CAVR Executive Committee members received the offer of Volunteer Canada to sit on its board of directors. The new structure of Volunteer Canada provided for the creation of a consultative committee consisting of a core of CAVR members who would then join the twelve-member board. Three of the nine other members would come from volunteer centres, which represent most of the membership of Volunteer Canada and which already form an initial consultative committee within the organizational structure of Volunteer Canada. The other members – lawyers, directors of community organizations and companies – would come from the community.

The two consultative committees planned for in the new organizational chart were to represent the interests of the two groups on the Volunteer Canada board. The functions of these committees would be to inform members of the board of Volunteer Canada about the work accomplished by their own network, and to raise members' awareness of the challenges, issues and opportunities that arise to promote the management of volunteerism in Canada.

The crucial benefits represented by inclusion of CAVR in the new structure of Volunteer Canada are still numerous and significant:

- Volunteer Canada is a major organization in the voluntary sector in Canada. Its financial, human, technological and material resources are considerable. It has twenty-five paid staffers working from a head office and satellite offices in Ottawa.
- The existence of Volunteer Canada and its financial support over the years are tied to financing from the federal government. Volunteer Canada promotes volunteerism, viewed by the Canadian government as a "heritage value."
- Volunteer Canada is an organization with connections to political power; it is linked to influential networks and is canvassed to participate in major dossiers such as data gathering and the interpretation of the results of national surveys on volunteerism and philanthropy.
- Volunteer Canada is introducing major public awareness and promotion activities. It has the means for the production and dissemination of educational material and high-quality advertising. It has authority in several areas, such as the integration of immigrant communities into voluntary action, the supply and demand of volunteerism through the Internet, etc.
- A few years ago, Volunteer Canada established a national filtering campaign for volunteers that launched the promotion of the sound practice of risk management.
- This year, Volunteer Canada received the sum of \$50 million from the Canadian government to pursue its organizational activities. Part of this sum will be

allocated to building its own new network of administrators of volunteer resources.

- Finally, Volunteer Canada is endeavouring to create an online, master's training program in conjunction with the University of Ottawa, intended for administrators of volunteer resources in Canada.

At the meeting, the three guest members greeted the proposal with open minds, taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of such an association. There was a real possibility to influence the board of directors on agendas, budgets for the certification of administrators of volunteer resources, and support for national conferences for those administrators. The major challenge lay in the different management styles of the two organizations.

The openness of the three CAVR Executive Committee members to the proposal was also motivated by the virtual burnout of members trying to maintain CAVR activities with limited resources. There was also a desire to accelerate the development of the profession of administrator of volunteer resources, bearing in mind the future of our association and its Executive Committee. For these reasons, those of us who attended the meeting were interested in the proposal despite the obstacles, and in the hope that our cause would be advanced within the board of directors of Volunteer Canada.

The three people authorized presented the proposal to our National Executive in a conference call. Overall, the reaction was animated and unequivocal; it embodied members' interests and passions as well as their shortcomings, defeatist attitudes, illusions and false beliefs. The analysis is as follows.

The Supreme Illusion: "We Are Proactive!"

The initial reaction was a refusal to consider the proposal on the grounds that our soul and identity were at stake. Thus there was confusion about the what we were supposed to be protecting: weren't the members protecting their roles and personal views rather than the future of our profession? Another response took a lukewarm proactive approach, one suggested before: we would take back the reins, circumvent Volunteer Canada and

launch a large recruitment campaign for new members. We would embark on different drives, create new alliances and organize campaigns to promote and lobby for our profession. We could conquer the world.

In practice, this proactive stance was actually a reactive response, again reflecting a reluctance to examine our beliefs, assumptions and behaviour patterns.

The Case of the Boiled Frog

CAVR was retreating into reactions observed in the past and sustained, at times, by unsound group dynamics. Its behaviour can be compared to that of the “boiled frog,” covered in water being brought slowly to the boil. Without being aware of it, the frog drifts toward total paralysis since its system, predisposed to detect sudden change in the environment, does not identify change that is gradual and slow.

For several years, CAVR has been in a reactive mode in its relations with Volunteer Canada. Organizational attitudes and behaviour recur, without an in-depth examination of values and presuppositions that have been taken for granted. This operating method entraps the organization in a paralyzing stagnation, which it is vaguely aware of but does not fully recognize.

Members of the Executive Committee do not discuss actual situations and the silence imparts a climate of distrust and apathy.

Withdrawal behaviour emerges in group meetings. Less open and fruitful discussion, private conversations between members, and passive-resistance behaviour patterns that entail behind-the-scene intrigues are examples of paralyzing situations. The organization minimizes the results to which it could aspire and which it could, in fact, achieve.

The Comforting Delusion: “We Learn from Our Experiences”

CAVR assumes that it learns from experience and that the wisdom of its decisions is based on past events. Unfortunately, the consequences of the decisions taken occur far later in time and space. The Executive Committee, according to our by-laws, changes every two years. Mistakes made are not immediately recognized within a time frame

useful for learning. Occasionally, the consequences are not felt at the source of the mistake, so they are neither recognized nor analyzed. They are not used in an optimum manner for the learning of the organization. A decision taken a few years ago around our certification program continues to affect at times the perception and quality of the program. The decision approving applications was disputed by some of the candidates themselves, who considered them to be “substandard,” creating a heated debate. The team that has since been formed has been unable to make use of the learning opportunity. A recent reference to that decision did not generate new discussions on the issue, as it should have.

The Myth par excellence: The All-Powerful Management Team

In the face of these dilemmas and disappointments, the management team demonstrated strength and solidarity that camouflaged some internal dysfunction. Members of the Executive Committee presented “the enemy” with a united, solid front. To maintain that image, disagreement was stifled, those with differing opinions remained silent, and decisions were diluted or seemingly pressed upon members. Disagreement emerged and schisms were created within the group. Opportunities to analyze preconceived ideas and individual experiences were lost. Organizational learning was compromised.

Our education from early childhood highlights one objective: to give the right answer. We will go to any lengths to avoid situations that show our ignorance or uncertainty. Organizations magnify this distortion by praising individuals who excel in promoting their ideas and personal goals. No attention is paid to those who explore and provoke thought on complicated matters. Our ingrained pattern of personal protection prevents us from disclosing those defences and even blocks out knowledge of those debilitating mechanisms. Chris Argyris states that we thereby develop “skilled incompetence” that restricts learning within organizations.

Wicked Questions:

- **How are members of the Executive Committee analyzing Volunteer Canada’s offer?**

-
- Which objective conditions, mechanisms and help would be required to conduct an analysis that would break the “skilled incompetence” of our thinking?
 - How would members of the Executive Committee engage in a discussion on the phenomena of camouflage and defence mechanisms in the team?

Chris Argyris: Changing Personal Reasoning to Create Learning Organizations

The action lever can be found in the individual, and an organization becomes “learning” if its members upgrade their capacity to take decisions and act effectively. This is the idea behind Chris Argyris’ theory.

The main aim is to fight defensive habits that appear in every organization and run counter to change and learning. The members are able not only to learn and take decisions more effectively, but also to question and change the logic of their actions. By helping members of organizations change their thought patterns, and by facilitating the way they learn constructive and non-defensive reasoning, the organization becomes a “learning” one (Argyris 1995, 21).

Members of organizations must learn a new *theory-in-use* and adopt “double loop” learning. They must be able not only to solve routine problems – single loop learning – but also to act efficiently in complicated, even threatening situations. Instead of closing themselves into defensive reasoning, they must agree to question the guiding values behind their action strategies. “Double loop” learning refers to this capacity to question and, if need be, to change the guiding values (ibid., 20).

A CEO learns that many procedures in his organization present obstacles to innovation. Any new idea must pass through 275 stages before being accepted. New methods reduce the number to 75, which considerably raises the number of innovations. The director’s action seems to be efficient and well considered. However, this represents “single loop” learning. From the “double loop” learning perspective, the CEO ought to have tried to

find out how such situations could happen in his organization and why the problem was not dealt with before (Argyris 1999, 229–31).

Individuals in an organization have trouble in unravelling system dynamics and tend to explain organizational problems by recent events. That trivializes the causal importance of existing structures and operating methods. The actors must identify the responsibility that falls upon them in the existing operational mode of the system. Often they are not aware of the consequences of their own decisions. An organization can become “learning” only if its members acquire a clear vision of their role and responsibility in the way the organization works.

Argyris (1995, 21) states that by changing their theory of action members can make their organization “learning” and equip it for “double loop” learning. The basis of this theory is that the actors must elaborate and determine their actions (an active not a passive role). Our actions and behaviour are the fruit of our reasoning, even when it is automatic and subconscious. When we are confronted with a situation considered threatening, there is a gap between *espoused theory*, i.e., the theory we invoke in order to explain our actions, and the theory actually underlying our actions, or *theory-in-use*. Although espoused theories may vary from one person to the next, the same theory-in-use is adopted by everyone (ibid., 20–21).

Take, for example, Volunteer Canada’s proposal to provide a place within its organizational structure. CAVR Executive Committee members justified their refusal to consider it out of a feeling of loyalty and commitment to their own organization’s mission and the promotion of their members’ interests. That was the *de facto* espoused theory.

In a situation considered threatening, individuals become defensive. Self-fulfilling and self-fuelling prophecies take form and a vicious cycle gains momentum: defence of positions, hasty assessments of others’ actions, the unwarranted blame and judgment of others, and analyses based on impressions not logic. These action strategies result from defensive reasoning built-in from early childhood: realizing our goals with unilateral control, maximizing our gains, minimizing losses, suppressing negative feelings, and

always advancing the argument of rationalism for our conduct. Organizational habits facilitate the reinforcement of this model.

In the case mentioned above, the members of the Executive Committee opposed to investigating the objective of the proposal stated that they did not want CAVR to lose its own identity. Their traditional attitude went further: it was not worth meeting with the chair of the Board of Directors of Volunteer Canada who could not change anything. Everything was already a known quantity!

The Way to a Learning Attitude

When organizations want to become “learning,” they must first become aware of the discrepancy between their espoused strategy and their strategy-in-use (stemming from theories on the same concept). They must act as they say they think. In addition, they must acquire a set of new guiding values: adopt the means to obtain valid information, make informed choices and control their implementation in order to locate and rectify mistakes. These values must be part of their new espoused theory and their new theory-in-use.

The constructive reasoning that results from this induces the individual to defend his positions. It also promotes evaluations and opinions based on objective and actual facts as well as testing the validity of those evaluations. These new action strategies mitigate defensive attitudes at all levels. The organization becomes a system in which “double loop” learning can be implemented in a sustainable fashion.

Let us now go back and see what these new action strategies could bring to CAVR.

Let us reset the scene. The members favourable to investigating the proposal present their ideas openly in a climate of attentiveness and genuine interest in understanding other members’ points of view. They assess the issues, the benefits they see, which they illustrate honestly; they express their views on the motivation underlying the offer in a relaxed and unintimidated manner, and they state their wish to better evaluate Volunteer Canada’s intentions. Subsequent meetings with the latter, and possibly with the Volunteer Centres (which represent the second consultative council of the Volunteer Canada board

of directors as presented in the proposal) provide exchanges of view on past experiences of cooperation between CAVR and Volunteer Canada.

Members who do not agree with the investigation adopt the same attitude. They take the opportunity to open up the communication process, and suspend their attitudes of self-fulfilling and self-fuelling prophecies by not predicting disastrous results. They do not polarize the discussion that divides the group. They use disinterested arguments effectively to promote the cause, the mission and well-being of CAVR and its members. The members who do not agree genuinely examine the balance between their espoused theory (their commitment to, and passion for CAVR) and their *theory-in-use* (their real actions, such as defensive attitudes, the knee-jerk rejection of new ideas, etc.). Defensive reactions are reduced and the organization has increased its learning opportunities.

A new conversation could take place as follows:

Member 1: We have come back from Ottawa with an offer to participate in the structure of Volunteer Canada. The new structure presented by senior management is also supported by their Board of Directors.

Member 2: What is this offer? What are the details?

Member 1: The main points are . . .

Member 3: Oh. Doesn't this model seem like the one already presented to us that we rejected for fear of being taken over? Do members here today remember that offer and our refusal? What were our arguments then?

Members 5 and 7: We remember the offer made to us two years ago. Here are the details... Couldn't we have a new dialogue on this? The situation of our organization isn't the same.

Member 4: Our organization has gained experience, self-assurance and expertise since that time. Surely we have enough confidence now to enable us to analyze this offer from a new point of view. Obviously we must avoid hasty decisions and trust our own evaluation skills and reasoning...

Member 1: I must also tell you that Volunteer Canada wants us to get back to them with a counter proposal reflecting our own objectives more precisely.

Member 2: What will our membership think of it? Will they be apprehensive or in favour of it?

Member 3: I believe that the final proposal we place before them, based on serious and valid information, will be analyzed by them. By assuring our members of adequate follow-up and controlled implementation, as well as maintaining communications with them, our project will be well received.

Member 1: Our diligence has served us well in the past. We just have to pursue it. We have the interests of our profession at heart. We will be able to continue to play our role but in a different way, with increased resources and without selling our soul at the same time...

Member 5: Will our salaries as volunteers go up. . . ?

Peter Senge's Five Disciplines

In *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), Peter Senge gives a metaphor in presenting his five disciplines: just as previously created technologies were combined for the powered flight of the first DC-3, five new “technological components” or personal disciplines work together to generate the Learning Organization. Each becomes complementary to the other in the process of creating organizations that really learn and that are able to continually expand their ability to realize their aspirations. The five disciplines are the following (Senge 1990, 139–269):

1. Systems thinking
2. Personal mastery
3. Mental models
4. Shared vision
5. Team learning

These disciplines do not create the Learning Organization *par excellence*, revelling in its new laurels, but foster experimentation and organizational advancement.

Senge's work reflects some intriguing ideas on organizational life. It draws its inspiration from eastern and western, secular and spiritual philosophies. Based on years of observation and research, it has universal applications, for the foundations of its analysis are those of the human being. As well as speaking of the seven learning disabilities mentioned above, Senge explains the benefits of a language and vision of the world in terms of "interrelational loops"; they expand linear perception, fragmented views and unproductive actions. Senge also supports a systemic vision of the world. He speaks of the behavioural structure that paralyzes us, and then presents the lever effect. His work is impressive with its depth and authenticity. It mirrors the great simplicity and humility in his approach and in his suggested actions.

Senge presents the disciplines as developmental techniques that must be studied, but above all, put into practice to become useful. His disciplines are personal, encompassing our thought patterns, our deepest aspirations and our interactions with others. They differ from benchmarking techniques that result in simple emulation. The Learning Organization does not represent a final outcome, but rather a philosophy of organizational "being." On this point, Senge advocates the practice of the five disciplines at the personal, family and social levels.

The five disciplines converge in the Learning Organization. Through synergy, each dimension helps the other to enhance the organization capable of growing and realizing its highest aspirations.

Systems Thinking

We tend to interpret the world by examining isolated events in systems (Senge 1990, 6–7). We misjudge the interrelationships in our lives and actions whose effects often extend over long periods. We cannot assume the necessary objectivity since we are part of the action.

Clouds that form, a darkening sky and leaves whipped off trees announce an approaching storm. We know that a downpour will follow, flooding backyards with rising waters, but finally, the sky will clear. All these events are separated in time and space, although they are all interrelated. Each influences the other and they are mostly located far from our field of vision. We understand the systemic nature of a storm by viewing it as a whole, and not in its individual components.

Organizational life must draw inspiration from this model. Systems thinking is a framework of references consisting of the learning tools that help us to understand influences, movements and interrelationships, and to act more effectively. It is a practice that becomes intuitive; indeed, children practice it with great skill – to get their own way!

Personal Mastery

The discipline of personal mastery represents the moral and spiritual pivot of the Learning Organization. This is not a matter of domination or power exercised over others, but rather, the art of alive questioning and of continuous improvements to our projects and endeavours within lifetime context. It is our commitment to the learning required to polish and hone the process of achieving our most cherished aspirations.

Personal mastery constantly clarifies, refines and deepens our personal vision, mobilizes our energies, develops patience and cultivates the skill of seeing things objectively (Senge 1990, 141–42). It is the spiritual base of the organization.

However, organizations do not encourage individual growth in this direction. Resources are not exploited and achievements fall below their potential. Individually, we are all capable of talking about what we want to see disappear rather than determining what we would like to do with our lives. The same applies to organizations.

Mental Models

Mental models consist of images, presuppositions, and generalizations deeply entrenched in our psyches. These images exert a great influence on our way of interpreting the world

and acting within it. For example, people's style of dress subconsciously influences our opinion of them and of others who share their particular taste in clothing.

In organizational life, opportunities for innovation are sometimes lost owing to the presuppositions and the generalizations we all make (Senge 1990, 175–76). Tacit mental models are never brought to the surface and discussed, and presuppositions as well as prejudices prevent us from envisioning new alliances, services or markets.

Let us turn the mirror back on ourselves, learn to disclose and analyze implicit mental models, to cultivate the art of conversations balanced between questions and the defence of personal points of view, in other words, to hold conversations that expose us to the influence of others (ibid., 191–93). These steps are, without any doubt, learning practices.

Shared Vision

A shared vision is an art that, once acquired, encourages individuals to commit their minds and intellects to a common project. A few charismatic managers can bring a vision to life for everyone. Similarly, a crisis rallies strengths for the time required to overcome it. The art of the shared vision is more demanding since it requires the capacity to draw upon eloquent images of what the vision is intended to create. This skill of creating images and scenarios encourages genuine commitment and not simple, passive observation (ibid., 211–13).

Team Learning

When sports teams or ballet companies excel, members of the group grow, develop and learn more quickly than if they were in *isolated* learning situations. *It could be said that group intelligence surpasses the intelligence of individuals.* The discipline of team learning is essential for dialogue and the suspension of prejudices and defensive habits. Dialogue – a reasoning out of things in conversation, and thus the creation of meaning together – enables the group to discover the knowledge, intuition and wisdom that would not be acquired individually (Argyris 1999, 10). Several ancient civilizations recognized the value of dialogue, lost in our modern societies. However, there is some evidence of a return to these “learning” conversations.

For modern organizations, the “learning” unit is the team, not individuals. That is the crux of the matter: “learning” teams produce Learning Organizations.

Wicked Questions:

In light of the five personal disciplines...

Systems Thinking

- **Can the metaphor of the storm be used to understand the link between management of the membership and the certification program? How would it be analyzed? Which other aspects of the organization would benefit from this systemic analysis?**

Personal Mastery

- **CAVR has a mission statement, a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. How can a link be made between management tools and the concept of personal mastery?**
- **Are we committed to achieving personal mastery?**
- **Who am I? What are my thoughts on the question of personal mastery? Am I living my life in a “personal mastery” mode?**

Mental models

- **Which mental models are blocking our actions? How can we apply “double loop” learning to our own mental models?**

Shared vision

- **What concrete and eloquent images do members of the Executive Committee have around our vision? How can members' interest in the creation of images be raised? Does a link exist between image, planning, sponsorships, partnerships, community relations, etc.?**
- **“Creative tension” is the distance between personal mastery and the vision. Is CAVR aware of the presence of this creative tension?**

Team learning

- **What is our grading (from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest) of our openness to dialogue regarding Volunteer Canada's offer?**

6

Spirituality, Moral Foundations and Learning Organizations

In *Spirituality in Management Education* (1997, 122), Judith Neal gives as the origin of the word “spirit” the Latin verb *spirare*, which means “to breathe.” The word “spirit” denotes the element within us that gives us life and makes us breathe – the intangible, vital force that gives life meaning.

Spirituality enables our being to emerge. It is a blend of feelings, inner strength, self-knowledge and cherished values – what Matthew Fox calls the “learning of the heart” (ibid., 22).

Neal says that spirituality in organizational life is reflected in individuals’ conception of their work. It should be seen as a channel or opportunity for personal growth, making a significant contribution to society, and exploring personal values such as integrity, concern for others and personal ethics. Spirituality may also be present in an organization, expressed through the means it puts in place to sustain its members’ development and spiritual growth.

Jones and Hendry (1992, 16) associate ethical and social questions with key factors in a Learning Organization (team learning, changes in power structures, introducing and supporting change, leadership, vision and discussions of an ethical and social nature). The authors link spirituality to the life force and vision of the organization. It is this vital force that influences so-called “transfigurational” learning.

In *Moral Foundations of the Learning Organization* (2001, 319, 323–24), Robin Stanley Snell presents the ten moral foundations of a Learning Organization:

1. Communal business cultures accountable to Aristotelian and Kantian ethics
2. Avoidance of mercenary and exploitative discourses of appropriation

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3. Commitment to collectively improving a record of meeting stakeholders' moral claim
 4. Humility and transparency in the face of stakeholder criticism
 5. Leadership that is virtue-seeking and humble in admitting shortcomings
 6. Freedom of speech and other civil liberties
 7. Tradition constituted and tradition constitutive inquiry
 8. Compassion for employees
 9. Help to those who are in need
 10. Critical trust and transparent decision making

The voluntary sector, as observed in Canada through the my experience with colleagues in the McGill-McConnell Program, as well as in my contacts with the voluntary sector in Australia and India, seems to be motivated by a concern to contribute to the enhancement and realization of the individual who can contribute to, and work for social harmony (Aristotle). The individual is considered as an end in himself and not as a means to reach objectives related to productivity (Kant) (*ibid.*, 325).

This wonderful work platform also represents a responsibility that must be kept in sight. For example, vying for sponsors and seeking access to visibility bring out defensive reflexes and instigate competitive races that may cause organizations to deviate from their mission.

Respect for civil liberties through quality dialogue within organizations is a surprising but necessary concept, since several victims fall by the wayside in the pursuit of organizational authenticity. The search for truth is far from being unanimous and the development of a charter of rights for speech appropriate to the deficient organization may be on the horizon (*ibid.*, 332).

Snell suggests a few ways to encourage organizational learning (*ibid.*, 336–37):

-
- Practicing Kantian ethics to clarify decisions (man is an end in himself, not a means)
 - Recognizing intangible and discreet contributions
 - Expanding the definition of excellence in learning efforts
 - Promoting transparency in governance and management practices
 - Encouraging different perceptions and criticism
 - Introducing civil liberties to counteract paralysis and silence
 - Enabling individuals to contribute within sound and “reasonable” limits
 - Utilizing techniques to search for meaning (surveys, ethical “audits”)

Wicked Questions:

- **Can CAVR exercise leadership in considering the concept of transparency in governance? Do the concepts of inclusion, receptiveness to divergent perceptions and accommodating under-represented communities represent fields for exploration?**
- **Do the principles in CAVR’s Code of Ethics echo Snell’s ideas? Does our Code of Ethics include Kantian and/or Aristotelian ethics? Can we explore these concepts further with regard to our internal operations?**

7

Leadership and Learning Organizations

This section deals with leadership as it relates to five dimensions: a leader's personal qualities, his (or her) role, the nature and typologies of leadership and, finally, female leadership.

Personal Qualities

The notion of leadership has long been associated with the qualities of a person at the top of the pyramid who, blessed with charisma and the skills related to the “command and control” mode, takes decisions on the direction and future of the organization. The media have extended the cult of the individual by concentrating success stories around one person, for writing the story of an organization with thousands of activities and contributions is neither easy nor attractive. Tolstoy commented on this slanted manner of representing reality. In *War and Peace*, he said that we have no idea how to explain the forces of history; therefore, we mention a few individuals and their activities, and claim we have explained everything.

Daniel Goleman and Peter F. Drucker describe the factors required of leadership in different and complementary ways. In “What makes a leader?” (2000), Goleman presents the five qualities of an effective leader: self-knowledge, mastery over one's emotions, empathy, motivation and social skills. He states that basic capacities, such as the intelligence quotient and technical skills, are entry-level conditions for management duties, but he demonstrates the contribution of the five qualities mentioned as representing emotional intelligence, a *sine qua non* for effective leadership. In a 1999 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Managing oneself,” Drucker places the emphasis on one of these qualities, self-knowledge, which he considers a “threshold” skill in self-development. It is also required to optimize our contribution, based on the knowledge of our values, our strengths and our preferences, and in communicating this information to

associates, colleagues and employers, i.e. by asking the questions “How do the short-term, result-based values of this organization mesh with mine?” “Am I more effective as a consultant or as the principal decision maker?” Or “I accept the challenge of this position, but here is how I see the problem . . . Here is how I structure my thinking around possible solutions and the time required to reach the objectives . . . Is that acceptable?” This knowledge keeps individuals alert and equipped to decide the right time to make changes to our working life, which now extends over many productive years.

The Leader’s Role

The authors consulted present various leadership roles: the “connector”; the promoter of “intrapreneurial” structures; the leader who provides support for chaos; and the *catalyst* in a culture of accountability.

The “Connector”

Senge presents the role of “connector” as that of the agent who disseminates new ideas. The lesson he draws from the ten years since *The Fifth Discipline* was published is that individuals and teams with achievements to their credit in their organization are the most exposed. The more they accomplish, the more they come up against their organization’s “immune system.” Success is not followed by recognition and appreciation. People do not automatically say: “What an achievement! How did you do it?” So work must be performed within a network, between individuals with good chemistry. The greatest challenge remains the dissemination of ideas. New ideas are threatening and their realization is blocked. Horizontal communities of practitioners are important in disseminating visionary ideas.

Joy Cullen (1999, 46) quotes Ann Brown, a psychologist who has made a link between cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives in Learning Organizations. Brown has created the concept of “learning communities.” Of the five principles in her theory, that of the effective leader’s role is not only to create mission statements or strategic plans, but also to create a Learning Organization in which planning and vision are built up collectively. It is a social and cultural building exercise.

The Champion of "Intrapreneurial" Structures

Jones and Hendry (1992, 13) quote Pettigrew and Whipp who do not speak of leadership, but of "leaders of change." For these authors, organizational learning results mainly from a deliberate organizational philosophy. This encourages the emergence of organic teams that are mobilized around projects and synergetic ideas, managing their own processes.

"Intrapreneurship," according to Hesselbein and his co-authors (1996, 36), is the concept of the emerging organization. The authors suggest that organizational complexity can no longer benefit from leadership concentrated in a single place. The role of leader is now to create an organizational culture that fosters free enterprise within the organization. Leadership inspired by the democratic values of respect, and freedom of opinion, association and justice creates the framework for action enabling individuals to be "at their best." They will be able to say, like the people mentioned by Lao Tzu: "We succeeded on our own!" (ibid., 25).

Promoter of Culture and Accountability

Peter Senge believes that organizational leadership must be re-examined by the individuals within those organizations. Leaders cannot be considered as those who have the answers. The level of seriousness of individuals in developing their own abilities plays a great role. The continual use of outside consultants generates dependency. Consultants can contribute all the parts of the answer, but the crucial inside thinking about operating methods, ways of thinking and personal interactions still doesn't take place. The American essayist H. L. Mencken once wrote: "For every complex problem there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong." Learning comes from facing complicated problems and devoting careful thought to their solutions. This process is more demanding than finding rapid solutions. There is a world of difference between finding a "quick fix" and a process that provides for common reflection on tangible problems. Leadership is not a one-way street, nor is it concentrated in a single nerve point. It is a matter of the attitude of all the players toward questioning and the way of seeing the way into parts of the solution. The directors must be agents of change in ways of thinking and ways of acting.

The Leader as a Support for Chaos

Nonaka (1998, 59) supports the idea that the leaders of an organization must create and maintain conditions of chaos or fluctuation that foster the search for new information by small, organic, self-directed teams. He maintains that the organization needs to dissolve daily routine to regenerate itself. Fluctuations entail cooperation in resolving the differences encountered (ibid., 65). The principle of rotating duties is one way to regenerate ideas. Staff-hiring policies are also a means to promote the contribution of different cultures and experiences, as well as the shock of ideas. Inviting an environmentalist into a team responsible for discussing ethical rules for hunters and trappers will undoubtedly make for a framework of multiple references.

The Nature of Leadership

In *Servant Leadership* (1991, 8), Robert Greenleaf shares his ideas on the nature of leadership, its characteristics and its power. Starting from the hypothesis of a leadership crisis, he proceeds to analyze our environments, which are hardly inclined to recognize the voice of the modern prophet – a voice that potentially exists within us all. Greenleaf maintains that human beings' inability to abolish poverty, discrimination and many other evils comes from our personal failings, each of us in turn, action by action (ibid., 47).

This leadership that serves others answers the following dilemma: does a person who decides to place himself at the disposal of others eventually make a difference in their lives? More wisdom, less precariousness, etc. Greenleaf says that the decision to help and serve is an act of faith supported by the personal intuition that one can make a difference (ibid., 114). This is the basis of leadership serving others. Greenleaf invites the analyst in us to make way for the artist. The leader has the skill and duty to act, preventing setbacks and dilemmas (ibid., 11). Inaction would not be ethical (ibid., 26). The director sees the organic unity of the past, present and future (ibid., 42). He sees things and acts without ever possessing all the information. The art of leadership lies in the skill to fill in the gaps through intuition and creative thought. It doesn't have to be infallible in order to express itself.

Gardner (1996, 11) presents the leader's influence from four points of view. The leader exerts his influence through his narrative capacity, telling the history of his organization, of society, or even his personal story as it concerns his dreams and aspirations. A leader exerts influence through persuasion and not through coercion that generates resistance and distrust. A leader exerts influence through his capacity to express himself and through his actions. It is crucial to allow the time and opportunity for thinking about actions, objectives, procedures, mistakes and lessons, for a leader always puts his mistakes into perspective (ibid., 8). Opportunities for learning replace the temptation to let everything slide. Leadership also consists of recognizing one's strengths, developing them and using them as levers for specific action, and not being too concerned about one's weaknesses.

Typologies of Leadership

In *Leadership that Gets Results* (2000, 80) Daniel Goleman mentions six leadership styles that leaders should know and become adept in. He believes that the possibility and benefits of developing emotional skills enable leaders to go from one style to another.

Goleman's article includes remarkable discoveries on the primordial brain and the limbic system, the seat of the emotions (ibid., 88–89). The time it takes us, the practitioners, to learn the different leadership styles is used wisely. Unlike technical learning accomplished quickly in the neo-cortex, learning new behaviour patterns in the presence of so many old habits is not so fast! New neurological pathways must develop to the point where they become (by default) instinctive.

The six leadership styles, coercive, authoritarian, affiliating, democratic, pacesetter and coaching, all have their advantages and their typical impact. Goleman's studies in the field show that many individuals master the six leadership styles easily without being aware of the typology. The facility with which the styles are exercised reflects managers' degree of sensitivity in influencing those around them. Emotional skill can be developed with knowledge and practice (ibid., 89). Goleman gives the example of a manager who, within six months, through practice and coaching, developed his empathy, reduced excessive outbursts, and thereby contributed to a more committed climate in his

department (ibid., 88). Goleman favours the authoritarian, democratic, affiliating, and coaching styles. The coercive and pacesetting styles are used under specific conditions and for limited periods since they are powerful and potentially damaging (ibid., 86).

Kaczmarek and Cooperrider (1999, 72), in a remarkable article, recount the experience of constructive leadership that occurred in setting up a new world forum, the Mountain Forum, on the question of the survival and responsible development of mountains. The values of democracy, inclusion, respect, open-mindedness, decentralization, accessibility, transparent accountability and flexibility enabled 300 international groups to combine their efforts over seven years and create a world forum, present and active at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992 (ibid., 64). With no formal hierarchy, and without conflict between paradigms, the Forum became a worldwide reference in terms of vision, policy-making, and environmental, economic and social promotion. It also represents a landmark in responsible development, and the protection of populations and ecosystems (ibid.). Technology and the Internet were the instruments of liaison and the exchange of information, without, however, creating stances of power and authority (ibid., 72). The challenge of the leadership of this project was to find ways to link intelligibilities so as to define a world meta-culture of learning (ibid., 87). Ways were devised to elicit dialogue between people of different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, education, age, outlooks, prejudices and personal frames of mind. A new way of acquiring general and self-knowledge was implemented. It was a remarkable adventure that reflected Greenleaf's concept of leadership. The Forum was established before having all the answers – and by that very fact, it stands as an example of leadership.

In *Covert Leadership* (1998, 143), Henry Mintzberg compares organizational leadership to that exercised by the conductor of an orchestra, leadership responsible for giving free rein to the talent of performers at the top of their profession who are trained to work as a team, and who appreciate the energy and inspiration transmitted by their guide (ibid., 145).

Female Leadership and Factors Related to Gender

Nancy Adler, in *Did you hear? Global Leadership in Charity's World* (1998), and Judy B. Rosener, in *Ways Women Lead* (1990), speak of the deep motivation, characteristics and promises flowing from female leadership.

Citing many examples of leadership practiced by women in the world, Nancy Adler presents women's motivation and determination to perform the work required to create deep change in the publics they wish to serve. Several of them have abandoned traditional methods of action to establish bridges with their political and ideological opponents. They focus on long-term objectives to maintain the vitality of their energies and their mandate. They meet with their husbands' and brothers' murderers and expose their aspirations at a risk to their lives (Adler 1998, 139). They work in teams, without seeking personal power; they create and weave webs beyond the networks of their male colleagues. They continue to be wives, mothers, sisters and guides for outcasts, the helpless and cynics.

These women's leadership is transformational since it forces those around them to adapt their own interests to collective interests (Rosener 1990, 4). They prefer to ally themselves with people in taking concerted and interactive action. They encourage participation and not exclusive expertise. They recognize excellence in effort and determination in work. Their management style is characterized by openness to difference and diversity. Women such as Charity Ngilu, Corazon Aquino, Mary Robinson, Benazir Bhutto, Golda Meir, Maria Liberia-Peters, Tansu Çiller, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Aung San Suu Kyi, Agathe Uwilingiyimana and Anita Roddick have helped to expand a world vision of transformation in which men and women transcend history to establish new directions. To reflect one author's thought, "we are responsible for moulding history."

Wicked questions

The Role of Connector

- **Does CAVR play a connector role in disseminating new ideas? What is the state of its immune system with respect to receptiveness toward new learning?**

“Intrapreneurial” Structures

- **Is our network in an “intrapreneurial” mode? Can we adopt intrapreneurial structures further, and if so, how?**

Culture of Accountability

- **If leaders can’t, and indeed shouldn’t, have all the answers, how can CAVR find out what its members are thinking? Can technology play a part in making members accountable for the development of our organization?**

Support for chaos

- **How can creative chaos be supported? Which issues or questions would benefit from such an approach? Which connector leadership role could CAVR thereby develop with products emerging from creative chaos?**

8

Resources for the Learning Organization

Technology Supports

CAVR now has a Web site. It has developed listservs (client lists) that provide two-way communication between the Webmaster and members. Members likewise will soon be able to communicate among themselves. Development scenarios are multiplying and in some cases, new possibilities are likely to become reality. Below are some scenarios that could support CAVR in promoting the Learning Organization.

Listservs

CAVR members can exchange information on reading material, Web sites, and conferences coming to the country. They can seek help from colleagues on aspects of management, details of laws governing the work of newcomers (e.g. voluntary work and paid work being on the same footing as legally constituted employment), or management ethics.

Discussion Groups

Discussion groups are organized around regional issues (volunteerism as a penalty option for driving offences), and around national practices involving standards of practice (administrators of volunteer resources give training sessions to volunteers on matters of confidentiality). These discussion groups can also be converted into lobbying groups for recognition of the profession of administrator of volunteer resources.

Catalogue

The Web site contains a catalogue of the best titles on the administration of volunteer resources. The reading material suggested is annotated, and direct links take those interested to other reference, purchasing or borrowing sites.

Chats

Monthly chats on different subjects are organized around themes of interest to administrators at the start of their careers: for example, “What should the first steps be in a recruitment campaign of volunteers for a literacy program in my area?”; “How should volunteers corresponding to a given profile be selected?”; and so forth.

Internet Chat Calls

Internet chat calls are used to bring members of the Board of Directors together on points of contention that require urgent discussion: for example, cases of conflict of interest involving CAVR members, violations of the organization’s bylaws and other delicate situations.

Mini-Tutorial Software for Mini-Training Sessions

Mini-tutorial software packages provide mini-training sessions on the existence of new software on administration of volunteer resources, on revitalization and optimization of committee meetings, and on performance evaluation.

Web Conferences

Web conferences are organized at the start of each season. They are intended to welcome new members and allocate a coach for them within the organization. They are also used to announce forthcoming events or discussion groups, to post interesting links and to organize surveys. Brainstorming sessions are also planned to encourage reflection, curiosity and creativity.

Storytelling

In his Internet article “Manager, c’est aussi raconter” (“managing is also about storytelling”), Thierry Boudés states that stories are omnipresent in organizations, from the report of a visit to the recruitment process (what is a résumé, if not a form of autobiographical tale?) or even the presentation of a strategic plan. They are vital components of the organizational whole.

Exchanging stories is one of the ways to share and make intelligible one’s version of the world. Storytelling helps to structure reality. It is the phenomenon of testifying in which the witness interprets and completes the facts he has seen. He then sincerely thinks that his story reflects reality (ibid.).

The stories that circulate in organizations influence action. In fact, listening to a story is one way of experiencing a situation by proxy and learning lessons from it for present and future action. A new recruit who learns how his superior became angry over a document with spelling mistakes will definitely be more likely to resubmit an impeccable report (ibid.).

Interest in a story depends on a simple principle: one can put into story form something to which meaning can be attributed, and meaning is highlighted through storytelling. Telling a story represents the best way to attribute meaning. Managers, “bearers of meaning,” must therefore lend an attentive ear to their associates’ stories (ibid.).

Storytelling Helps Learning

In a world of fast-paced competition, organizations have a major stake in the control of knowledge. In his book on knowledge creation, I. Nonaka says that organizational learning is the outcome of continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka 1997, 81). It is the social dimension of knowledge.

All management of knowledge that is intended to take into account the learning of members of the organization creates propitious conditions for the exchange of stories

(Boudès 2002). Sharing stories of practices between equals in a non-threatening context is a powerful lever to deepen experiences and disseminate knowledge of the field.

Another aspect of storytelling is that organizations talk a great deal about themselves through institutional documents such as annual reports, quantitative data and other statistical documents. Storytelling differs from the nature of the organization's work; it is about what we are and what motivates us. Barry and Elmes say that telling a story is a way of building what is meaningful for a group. Storytelling recognizes the individual's experience by highlighting his or her respective contributions to the accomplishment of a final result. It represents a series of lenses that provide an understanding of the interrelation of our actions within a whole (Barry and Elmes 1997, 431).

At present, CAVR is conducting a national drive on its Web site requesting stories and short narration for the benefit of its 300 members. Through anecdotes and experiences, these stories illustrate the difference that volunteers make to the lives of the clientele we serve. They bring out the results we hope to achieve through our interventions and our programs. One anecdote is told by a member of the network. It shows that the volunteerism performed by a lady in a centre for the elderly has given her, in return, comprehension, empathy and a change in her everyday behaviour. It occurs to her occasionally to intervene in cash-register waiting lines to help older customers push their full grocery carts to the exit.

Another story tells how for several months, the diligent presence of a volunteer at the side of a baby was decisive in the child's psychosocial development. Her presence influenced the course of his life according to professionals in childhood development.

Storytelling represents what we are. It is fortunate that it occurs in organizational artefacts: the 3M Company has built the art of strategic storytelling into its strategic planning (Boudès 2002). Some cultures have always practiced the story for the benefit of their respective communities. Some practices in compensatory justice are also inspired by the need to communicate sorrow, helplessness and the desire to compensate through dialogue for the evils incurred.

Creation of Societies for Organizational Learning (SOLs) for the Voluntary Sector in Canada

The kind of learning discussed in this paper raises some serious issues. It concerns the nature of our relationship with ourselves, with others and with the organizations to which we contribute a great deal of energy, passion and time. In this sense, the scope of an organizational development project is only as great as the depth of individuals' commitment to it. Beyond that commitment, it takes sustained effort, and the patience to learn how to learn – despite the fact that our Western minds are used to thinking of short-term gain, large turnover and high yield on investment.

The idea of creating Societies for Organizational Learning (SOLs) linked to the voluntary sector came to us by the implementation of SOLs in the corporate sector by Peter Senge and his colleagues of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The corporations felt the need to bring together the common experiences of American companies that, in the '90s, took the approach advocated by the Learning Organization (Senge 1990, xvi).

Improved performance, less successful stories, different personal or organizational aspects triggered by change (and their sequences), the extent of management's inclination to support the desire for change expressed by individuals within their organization, the penetration of new ideas, experiments and tests, the motivation to institute reflection, the systemic character of change, and the values and leadership supporting efforts to learn, all require discussion and sharing. Grasping and disseminating learning is a colossal task. A community of practitioners in the Learning Organization must be formed to ensure the development of this type of project.

The voluntary sector has an advantage in that capacity-building activities are familiar to it. The creation of SOLs will demonstrate the sector's capacity to assume transformational leadership. The McGill-McConnell Program has mobilized the sector by transforming individuals through six mindsets, including a major ethical dimension. A program in ongoing transformation could quite possibly be envisioned using the principles of the Learning Organization.

9

Conclusion

In this study I have sought to observe and reflect, intensively and in depth, upon as broad a range of phenomena as possible within my area of the voluntary sector. When I entered the field of volunteer resources management seven years ago, I became involved at provincial and national levels. My involvement with the Board of Directors of CAVR has done much to deepen my personal values; I am glad to be working in the voluntary sector, for I feel at home with the ultimate objective of volunteerism, which is, essentially, to bring out the best in us as human beings. This congruence between my values, my convictions and my vision of the world has retained its integrity, supported by the successes and challenges that CAVR has itself encountered.

My front-line experience at the national level demanded a great deal of intense energy. I would like to express my appreciation for the courage, vision and determination that motivated the hearts and minds of so many men and women I have known who have realized remarkable projects in recent years. Our shared confidence in, and dedication to, our profession have often been the driving forces behind our remarkable growth since the early days. Certainly these have strengthened my personal commitment.

As a result, I have worked on this project with great intensity and enthusiasm. My most sincere wish is that the kind of thinking described and suggested in this paper will instil in other CAVR members the desire, interest and passion to seek self-knowledge – a “self” in the first person singular that will spread to the plural. I hope that our organizational culture will become even more a culture of questioning – that Peter Senge’s concept of personal mastery will penetrate our network through each of us. Finally, I hope that this vision of the Learning Organization built in a collegial manner will be structured clearly and communicated strongly, so that the entire organization may benefit.

I would hope, ideally, for the following:

- A committee would be created to “receive the document,” read it and conduct a preliminary analysis of the nature, objectives and context of the proposed work.
- The committee would distribute the information to the Board of Directors. A national think-tank consisting of qualified individuals from inside and outside CAVR would have the primary responsibility of proposing and building scenarios to explore the “wicked questions” included in this report. This think-tank would then establish the “minimum specifications” for conducting the process.
- The think-tank would next develop the scenarios and implements one or more of those proposed.
- Using the high-tech strategic tools developed by CAVR (listservs and the Web site), the think-tank would involve CAVR members in the activities, initiatives or projects described in the scenarios.
- The concrete results of these discussions on proposed initiatives and projects would be transmitted to the Board of Directors for endorsement. The Board would be expected to explain its reasons for rejecting any of the projects presented by the think-tank and participating members of the CAVR network.
- At each annual convention, one of the members of the think-tank would be responsible for explaining the spirit of the original project and the initiatives taken since the previous year.
- During the first five years of “Operation Learning Organization,” a positive progress report would be presented annually. In 2006, the Learning Organization Award would be introduced for CAVR members. Two years later, in 2008, the Learning Organization Award for the entire Canadian voluntary sector would be

presented, under the patronage of the first Canadian Society for Organizational Learning.

Such is the strategic future we can look forward to for the voluntary sector in Canada.

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