



Knoco Newsletter

August 2013 - the 10 dimensions of a learning culture



In This Issue

- [The importance of a learning culture](#)
- [1. Open](#)
- [2. Honest](#)
- [3. Empowered](#)
- [4. Learner](#)
- [5. Need to share](#)
- [6. Challenge](#)
- [7. Collaborative](#)
- [8. Remembering](#)
- [9. Patient](#)
- [10. Pursuing excellence](#)

Other News

Take our cultural survey

Find out how you stack up against the 10 dimensions of a learning culture.

[See here to take the survey.](#)

The ultimate goal of Knowledge Management implementation is for Knowledge Management to become "part of the way we operate" - to become embedded in the culture as well as the business. But what is a learning culture really like?

Read our introduction below, [take our free Culture Survey](#), or book a [culture audit](#).

The importance of a learning culture

"Culture" has many meanings, ranging from the artistic to the biological. Most of them share the idea that a culture is something that grows on its own once certain conditions are met.



[Rupert Lescott](#),
[Knoco UK](#)

In other words, cultures cannot be imposed or forced upon a body. Rather, the right conditions have to be created in which they can thrive. For example, plants have certain basic requirements for their growth: type of soil; levels of sunlight and moisture; minimal disturbance by pests or 'enemy' plants (i.e. weeds).

New Face in Knoco UK

[Knoco UK](#) has a new staff member, Rupert Lescott.



Rupert has worked with the British

Army Lessons Exploitation Centre, improving the lessons capture process, the supporting website, and the workflow for prioritising and acting on lessons. He has facilitated lessons capture workshops and business process review workshops at both operational and tactical level.

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If these conditions are met, plants will usually grow. Any gardener will know that you can only do so much tending, caring and interfering. Sometimes you just have to stand back, letting nature take its course. Forcing things may produce unintended consequences.

As with plants, so it is with learning. A learning culture encourages conversation between people, regardless of rank or function. It is present when people are open about their own failings and absent when they focus on the failings of others.

A learning culture exists when collaboration is valued above competition and where functional silos do not prevent the sharing of knowledge. Organisations that are relentless in their pursuit of excellence may have learning cultures; those that prefer to avoid challenge probably don't.

In this newsletter, we offer up 10 dimensions against which organisations, departments or teams can consider the extent to which they are growing and nurturing learning cultures. Ironically, those least confident of their own progress are at least making a start; whereas those that think they have little left to learn probably face a far greater challenge!

1. Openness vs defensiveness
2. Honesty vs dishonesty

Openness and honesty share a similar root, but they are subtly different

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elements of a learning culture.



[Ian Corbett, Knoco S Africa](#)

Openness is a measure of the degree to which people are receptive to feedback as well as alternative points of view - it is driven by a willingness to openly seek the truth.

An "open person" is comfortable with having their performance analysed for learning purposes.

Importantly it includes the willingness for mistakes to be analysed and discussed. The flip-side of this is closure, which commonly manifests itself in defensiveness. When this is widely seen, the behaviour is typically indicative of a "Blame Culture" where learning is impaired.

Honesty on the other hand is about "telling it like it is", which is often not the easy way out, and like openness is aligned with an intrinsic need for truth. In the sense of a learning culture, it represents the degree to which opinions and messages are filtered as they pass through an organisation.

When we talk of "Gatekeepers" this can be a crucial aspect - particularly in communication up and down a hierarchy as it can adversely affect how "positional influence" is used.>

Honesty is about telling the truth and nothing but the truth, Openness is about being receptive to honesty and truth.

3. Empowerment vs disempowerment

4. Learner vs knower

Empowerment means the extent to which people feel able to act on knowledge, independent of approval from their leaders. Empowered people take accountability for their own results and for their own learning; seeking for the knowledge they need, and applying it to improve performance. Empowerment is crucial for the development of Communities of Practice, for example.



[Nick Milton,](#)
[Knoco](#)
[UK](#)

The Learner/Knower dimension, on the other hand, represents the value that people in the organisation put on their ability to gain new knowledge, rather than rely on the knowledge they have. Knowers see their personal knowledge as an asset, to be hoarded and defended. Learners on the other hand see their ability to learn as an asset, and see their own knowledge as something that always can be improved.

5. Need to share vs need to know

6. Challenge vs acceptance.

Karl Erik Sveiby said that at the point of your career where you stop formal education, you automatically assume a



responsibility to teach. Such a premise is missing in most organisations, leading to

sharing becoming ad hoc. Equally there is no perceived responsibility on an

[Ian Fry,](#)
[Knoco E](#)
[Australia](#)

individual to ask - even if they think they know. Think of pilots cross-checking every decision and action as one extreme of this.

I am all for a "Bill of Knowledge Rights" where a person has the right to get the knowledge they need to be successful. That would impose a responsibility on the organisation to provide, and an equal responsibility to ask, and a mechanism for identifying gaps and remedies. It also enshrines the causal link between knowledge and performance.

Together with this comes the responsibility to challenge the status quo, rather than just accepting things for the way they are. A challenging culture never just accepts that "we've always done it that way" , and always challenges to see if there is a better way. Capturing a successful Lesson Learned, for example, should always be accompanied by the question "How can we do it better?"

The catchphrase "If it ain't broke: don't fix it" only and always looks backwards.

7. Collaboration vs competition.

8. Remembering vs forgetting.

Internal competition can kill organisational learning. A learning company has to strive for collaboration, and eliminate internal competition. We don't need one team to lose for another

to win, we need everyone to win.

A collaborative culture is one in which everyone feels the value of collaboration, and where people will willingly help others by sharing their

knowledge, knowing that they will receive help in return.



[Sapta,](#)
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The other factor here is about how well companies remember. It's about whether companies record their lessons and decision making, and start new projects based on learning from the past, or whether they constantly reinvent the wheel or start from a "blank sheet of paper". A forgetting company cannot be a learning company!

9. Strategic patience vs short termism

10. Relentless pursuit of excellence vs complacency.

The final elements of our cultural picture are the level of strategic patience, and the pursuit of excellence.

Patient companies take their time to learn, to understand the big picture. They

make decisions based on strategy and on understanding the root causes, rather than on fixing symptoms, and they look



[Jens Oyvind](#)
[Nielsen,](#)
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for the long term trends.

At the same time, learning organisations acknowledge there is always room for improvement, and openly admit how far they have yet to go. At an individual level, a balance needs to be struck between giving praise where it is due and an honest appraisal of what still remains to be done, and learned.

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