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Leadership and Organizational Development: The role of the leader in Learning Organization
design

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Capstone – summer 2014

Executive Summary

Many believe that the learning organization is the ideal work environment, where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Senge, 1994, p.3). The Outdoor Adventures (OA) program at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln has created a culture that values learning and growth in its student employees, and aligns closely with LO dimensions, such as the creation of continuous learning opportunities, promotion of dialogue and feedback, strategic leadership for learning, and embedded learning procedures. OA also aligns, though not quite as strongly, with the three remaining LO dimensions: encouraging team learning, connecting the organization to its environment, and empowering employees toward a collective vision. OA leaders impacts the organization’s alignment with the LO construct by designing a supportive learning environment, providing plenty of challenging learning opportunities followed by critical feedback and emphasizing strong personal relationships with students. While LO literature highlights strategic leadership for learning as the primary leader behavior required for LOs, OA’s success in creating a learning culture can be traced to leaders’ relationships with students and authenticity as well. Future research can focus on the role of relational and authentic leadership in LO design.

Leadership and Organizational Development: The role of the leader in Learning Organization design

Introduction

People want to have a fulfilling job that integrates their work and personal lives, rather than continuously battling to balance the two. They want to continue to grow and develop as individuals at work, rather than pausing the process from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. They expect more from work, and many organizations are attempting to create this environment for their employees.

Some researchers would describe this ideal environment as a learning organization (LO), one where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (Senge, 1994, p.3). This research will ask the question: How does an organization effectively become a learning organization?

In the process, it will look at the role of the leader in LO design, the benefits and potential consequences of pursuing this ideal, and whether or not the LO model is even realistic for organizations. Using the University of Nebraska’s Outdoor Adventures program as a case study, it will analyze their progress toward becoming an organization that supports the growth of its employed students.

Analytic Framework

The Millennial generation, born between 1976 and 2001, makes up 36% of the workforce, and are expected to comprise almost 50% by 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). While traditional management theory looks to manage, organize and control behavior, new leadership behaviors are necessary to maintain harmony with this new workforce.

Millennials are collaborators who view their manager as a mentor or coach, and want to continually add to their skillset in meaningful ways. Their top priorities at work are flexibility, the opportunity to make a difference, and compensation. Their next two priorities are professional development opportunities and trust in the organization’s leadership. To reach these goals, Millennials want coaching and feedback, collaboration, and a safe and open work environment (Brack, 2012). Even before this group of workers entered the labor force, researchers were studying a new kind of organization that focused on employee learning and its benefits for the organization. The LO now aligns with the needs of this new workforce.

Leaders in a LO assume learning is valuable, continuous, most effective when shared, and that every experience is an opportunity to learn (Kerka, 1995). LOs share common characteristics, such as providing continuous learning opportunities for their employees, fostering effective dialogue and openness, encouraging risk, and embracing creative tension (Smith, 2007).

Building a LO is personally demanding, especially when it is so easy for leaders to stay in their comfort zone. But leaders still pursue this ideal. Senge (2010, p.272) explains their motivation:

Some seek a better model for how to manage and lead change. Some are trying to build an organization’s overall capacity for continual adaptation to change. All seem to believe that there is a way of managing and organizing work that is superior in both pragmatic

and human terms, that significantly improves performance and creates the types of workplaces in which most of us would truly like to work.

LO research is often based on Peter Senge's ideas. Senge studies social system modeling and management at MIT and considers himself an "idealistic pragmatist" (Smith, 2007). He has pioneered what some call utopian and abstract ideas in management. "The learning organization is best thought of as a journey, not a destination; a philosophy, not a program" (Solomon 1994, as qtd. in Kerka, 1995). Even though they are abstract, these ideas became popular, and managers have implemented his ideas with varied success.

Critics claim the LO sounds like a utopia - a good idea, but unrealistic in practice. While there is no formula or quick fix to create this culture, progress in Senge's five disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking will bring leaders closer to their goal.

How to build a Learning Organization

Designing a LO is a never-ending trial and error process. The leader, understanding its guiding principles, creates an environment that is conducive to personal mastery, awareness of beliefs, team learning, and personal visions (Marsick & Watkins, 1994). Edmonson and Garvin (2008) identified three essential building blocks for the LO: a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and leadership. Senge's five disciplines will be discussed in the context of these building blocks.

Building block 1: Supportive learning environment

Managers can create a supportive environment by allowing followers to ask questions, float crazy ideas, and freely admit mistakes. More than being overly friendly with followers, it is about being straightforward, and respecting the follower enough to engage in openness (Edmonson & Garvin, 2008).

Classic student development theory is based on how much challenge and support is offered in an environment, and is applicable in a modern work environment focused on learning. People grow when support and challenge are balanced. If there is too much challenge and little support, the learner will be anxious and defensive. Too much support with no challenge is boring and leads to withdrawal. People are most likely to grow when they have high challenge and high support (Sanford, 1966).

Integrating learning and work is another way to create this growth environment. Trainings and programs can make employees feel like they have to learn on top of their required work. Integrating the two, making reflection - and action after reflection - part of the culture, can start this integration (Marsick & Watkins, 1994). Modeling personal mastery is another strategy to make continuous learning a pillar of an organization's culture.

LO Discipline 1: Personal Mastery

“From the individual quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization” (Senge, 2010, p.131). Personal mastery is the discipline of personal growth and learning. It is an individual’s action, and an organization’s commitment to individual learning. There are two movements essential to personal mastery: continuously clarifying what is important to us (our vision), and continuously learning how to see our current reality clearly. The gap between our vision and our current reality provides the creative tension that fuels our quest for personal mastery (Senge, 2010).

People with high levels of personal mastery live in continual learning mode. They do not arrive at their learning destination. They are aware of their growth areas, but remain confident in themselves. They have the capacity for delayed gratification. An organization’s commitment to personal mastery is a commitment to the growth of their people. It is not just for the sake of the organization’s success, but for the sake of human development. Great managers are enablers; they enable their followers to lead enriching lives (Senge, 2010).

Lots of organizations struggle to invest in personal mastery – it is soft and it is incalculable. But investing in personal mastery feeds people’s higher level need for personal growth. Work and life become more integrated when followers are not personally stunted at work, and creative tension created by followers’ visions moves the organization in unique directions (Senge, 2010).

Psychological safety is another fundamental part of this growth environment, and influences a follower’s sense of security, openness to learning, ability to adapt their behavior and general work engagement (Edmonson, 2003). Psychological safety is a follower’s perception of the consequences that might result from taking interpersonal risks in the work environment. Followers who feel safe also feel comfortable being themselves, and show themselves without fear of judgment or negative consequences to image or career. This makes it possible for employees to engage in the risky process of creative work (Edmonson, 1999). Employees calculate complex social statistics before taking an interpersonally risky action – the amount of interpersonal risk depends on the climate of the work group. If there is a chance they will get hurt, they will not act (Edmonson, 2003). Leaders can create a climate where an employee will choose to act.

Balanced challenge and support, a mastery culture, and psychological safety contribute to the safe learning environment. Safe environments are also full of people skilled in the art of dialogue, where the goal is true understanding, rather than winning the argument. Dialogue is essential for individuals to learn while working on teams.

LO Discipline 2: Team Learning

When a group of people function as a whole, they are aligned, acting on a shared vision that is an extension of personal visions. Teams have become the key learning unit in organizations, but it is important that they learn as a team, not act as individuals learning alone but acting as a team. To learn together, team members must become masters of dialogue and discussion (Senge, 2010).

Dialogue is a pristine concept, where people are free to explore complex issues without fear of judgment, and deeply listen to others' views. Individual views and defensive instincts are suspended. Dialogue takes us beyond an individual's understanding to gain insight we cannot alone. We suspend our beliefs and become observers of our own thought patterns. We stop defending our thoughts, and become more creative and less reactive in the process. Discussion is where views are presented and defended in order to make a decision. We normally engage in discussion, though often poorly. Dialogue is about exploration, discussion about decision. While both are necessary, defensive discussion is currently more common than open dialogue, though dialogue and discussion can be synergistic (Senge, 2010).

Teams in a learning organization practice dialogue and balance it with necessary discussions for action. Defensive routines where we protect ourselves from the threat of exposing our thinking can hamper the process and cause us to avoid honest conversations. It could be a faked confidence, or an overzealous commitment to group harmony. Leaders can help followers move past these defensive routines. Leaders can also help teams practice dialogue, calling dialogue sessions with a whole team, laying the ground rules, and acting as a facilitator to address an otherwise avoided topic. If teams act as colleagues, leave their positions at the door, and act with a spirit of inquiry, team learning can occur (Senge, 2010).

Building block 2: Processes and procedures for learning

Leaders of organizations can institutionalize learning through processes and procedures. David Kolb (1984) describes learning as a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. He describes four stages in his learning cycle: concrete experience (do), reflective observation (observe), abstract conceptualization (think), and active experimentation (plan). Without reflection, experience will not be translated to learning and new experiments.

The Army's After Action Reviews (AARs) are one good example of a learning procedure. After every program or action, the team gets together and asks themselves four questions: What did we set out to do? What happened? Why was there a difference? What can we do next time? These lessons learned are then compiled and available for anyone operating in a similar situation (Edmonson & Garvin, 2008). Leaders can start these processes by modeling learning behaviors like curiosity, inquiry, acknowledging uncertainty, and valuing input.

Practice is another LO entry point. LOs require practice fields so people can experientially learn and practice new skills. They need to practice dialogue, which depends on people finding ways to help others clarify their assumptions and mental models. Dialogue amplifies personal vision sharing, which can be transformed into an organic shared vision over time (Marsick & Watkins, 1994).

LO Discipline 3: Mental Models

Mental models are our internal pictures of how the world works. Leaders in LOs work to surface, test and improve these models. People learn to check their assumptions before acting.

Organizations can develop their capacity to surface and test mental models by prompting awareness and reflection, practicing with mental models, and promoting a culture that is open to challenge and inquiry. Becoming aware of our mental models takes practice. Organizations can institutionalize “reflective practice” to create lifelong learners (Senge, 2010).

Leaders also need to make sure their espoused theory lines up with their theory in use. Leaders need to act in accordance with their espoused theory, or reevaluate that value. Last, leaders should balance inquiry and advocacy. Someone without this balance might focus on advocacy alone, entering every conversation as a debate they are trying to win. Leaders that ask a lot of questions, and look to disprove their own views, have a better chance of exposing deeply held mental models that will keep their organization from moving forward (Senge, 2010).

Building block 3: Leadership that reinforces learning

If learning organizations are so wonderful, why do leaders have trouble creating them? Senge (2010) says it is because of what it requires of leaders. They must integrate innovative practices into daily work, surface mental models, facilitate dialogue, communicate shared visions that connect to people’s reality and foster a work environment that integrates work and learning (Senge, 2010). They manage a complex human system, where cause and effect is neither linear nor immediate.

LO Discipline 4: Systems Thinking

The cornerstone of a learning organization, this discipline is the foundation for the other four (Smith, 2001). It is the ability to see the whole structure, rather than focusing on its component parts. While many managers attempt to address complex systems with simple frameworks, leaders in LOs recognize their organization as an interconnected human system, and understand how change in one sector will affect another (Smith, 2001).

Leaders in LOs are designers, teachers and stewards. As designers, they are creating something they actively participate in, developing learning infrastructures, and listening to followers to establish guiding ideas that people references in their work. As teachers, they serve their followers, focused primarily on their development. As stewards, they must pursue new and emerging ideas, but also conserve the organization’s past (Senge, 2010).

We know that the relationship between employees and their supervisors plays an important role in individual performance (Joo, 2011). What role does leader relationships with followers play in LO development? Joo (2011) studied the role of Leader-Member Exchange Quality (LMX), and LO culture on individual performance. LMX theory claims that the quality of the leader’s relationship with the follower influences organizational outcomes, like the followers’ amount of effort. LMX has three stages: initial role expectations; mutual trust, loyalty and respect; and commitment to organizational goals. Joo (2011) found that when the leader develops a trusting relationship with the follower, and develops a learning culture, in-role job

performance improves. In this relationship, LO culture plays a moderating role between LMX and in-role job performance. In all these roles – relationship builder, designer, teacher and steward - leaders are also the champions of the organization’s vision.

LO Discipline 5: Shared Vision

A vision is the picture of the future we seek to create. A shared vision answers the question, “what do we want to create together?” and provides focus and energy for individual and organizational learning. While personal visions derive their power from an individual’s caring for their vision, shared vision gets its power from a common caring. It is a powerful force, and often develops out of a desire to be connected with others. At its best, it can uplift people to work toward a higher purpose, giving them the courage to do what is necessary in pursuit of the shared vision. A shared vision inspires risk taking and experimentation. Without a shared vision, the status quo remains (Senge, 2010).

A shared vision should build on many personal visions. Taking a retreat with top managers to write a vision statement and deliver it to the people rarely works – followers will only be able to comply, not truly commit to the cause. Ultimately it does not matter as much where the shared vision comes from, but how it is shared. Building it is an ongoing and messy process (Senge, 2010).

The best thing leaders can do to foster a shared vision is encourage the development of personal visions for each employee. This creates a culture of commitment, rather than compliance. They should also talk about their vision and encourage others to do the same. They should engage in a daily process of solving problems with their vision in mind, consistently communicating that vision and their decision making process to their followers. While you cannot force followers to commit to a shared vision, you can create favorable conditions for enrollment by being enrolled in the vision yourself, being direct and honest about the benefits and potential drawbacks of the vision, and letting followers freely choose to enroll (Senge, 2010).

Leaders in a learning organization also need to find the right people for their team. Jim Collins (1988) in his popular work, “Good to Great” called it getting the right people on the bus. Leaders need to hire the right people and support their growth for follower development and organizational achievement. Many leaders’ natural instincts are to hire the best talent to achieve this goal. The alternative is to hire and train for mindset instead of talent to support follower and employee growth, and organizational success.

Carol Dweck (2007) explains that many people are held back from achieving what they want to achieve, not by a lack of skill or training, but by a fixed mindset – the belief that our capabilities are fixed and cannot be improved through effort. The result is risk avoidance, disengagement, and constant work to maintain the image of a competent person, without embracing and working through new challenges. There is an alternative mindset; those with a growth mindset believe their capabilities are in flux and can be improved with effort. They seek risk and critical feedback as essential data for their growth and improvement. They learn from failure, and put in the effort required to grow (Dweck, 2007).

The alternative to fostering a growth mindset in followers and in organizations is the talent mindset - the deep-seated belief that having better talent at all levels is how you outperform your competitors (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001). Companies like

McKinsey and Enron swore by the talent mindset – hire top performers, or the “natural athletes”, from the best business schools, reward them often, give them freedom and pay them handsomely (Gladwell, 2002). But these stars rewarded for their innate talent begin to define themselves by their talent, and when times got tough and their identity was threatened, they did anything to defend their image. Those who are hired for their intelligence will defend that perception, fostering fixed mindsets in individuals, and in organizations. Leaders choose the right people, model learning behaviors and design the supportive work environment followers need to take risks and grow.

Learning Organizations in Higher Education

Initial LO research was done in the private industry, but researchers slowly moved toward nonprofits and public institutions. One focus has been on the learning cultures within Universities. While it seems like a natural fit, “learning in higher education and learning by higher education are two different concepts” (Holyoke, Sturko, Wood & Wu, 2012, p.437). Researchers point to some unique barriers making higher education institutions slower to adapt than private companies.

There are unique barriers to universities becoming LOs. First, academic departments are relatively isolated within the institution, causing the faculty to identify more with their discipline than with the University. Faculty often see themselves as independent contractors, rather than a part of a large organization. Second, an emphasis on individualism and autonomous academic work, and reward for individual success, makes team learning difficult. While autonomy is a valued trait in faculty, “a learning organization is not a collection of individuals who are learning; a learning organization requires individual and collective learning that must be integrated with the work of the organization” (Holyoke, Sturko, Wood & Wu, 2012, p.438-439). Third, faculty is rewarded for work that benefits the discipline, not the organization, further isolating them within their immediate field. Fourth, hierarchy is strong within departments where non-tenure faculty and administrators, who often do not fully understand their colleagues’ research, think critiquing a tenured faculty is inappropriate, intrusive, and even offensive (Holyoke, Sturko, Wood & Wu, 2012).

In order to become a LO, higher education institutions need to address these barriers by rethinking the reward structure and valuing collaboration as well as autonomy. They would have to remove barriers to learning and facilitate continuous learning by creating a culture of dialogue and inquiry. In addition, “the right people would be found and given a seat on the bus to gain alignment and momentum for building the new culture” (Watkins, 2005, p.416).

Measuring the Learning Organization

LO research has typically looked into the role of a LO culture on organizational performance, but few have looked into the role of the leader in LO culture design. Human resource professionals have an important role to play in LO design. While they often promote opportunities for individuals to keep learning, what is missing are the embedded systems, practices, and structures that can be regularly used to improve organizational performance (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). To support continuous learning, you need to build a learning climate and culture. Leaders build these cultures when they learn from their experience, influence the learning of others, and communicate clear expectations and parallel measures of success (Marsick & Watkins, 2003).

To measure the LO, Marsick & Watkins (2003) created the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ), which measures the learning culture in an organization. Correlations were found between DLOQ scores and organizational performance, measured by knowledge, mission, and financial performance. While the DLOQ measures continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue, and collaboration and team learning, the strongest predictor of knowledge performance was whether the organization has created systems to capture and share knowledge (Marsick & Watkins, 2003).

Barriers to creating a Learning Organization

When learning organizations were first discussed in the 90s, people were excited about the ideas, but unable to implement them. They did not know where to start. Marsick and Watkins (1994) identify barriers to build the LO:

- People cannot recognize and change their mental models. Challenging our basic assumptions can threaten our personal identity, so people avoid it.
- Learned Helplessness. After years of following orders, people no longer feel connected with the consequences of their actions. Employees in LOs cannot just do their job and go home, they need to be proactive, curious and self-directed.
- Tunnel vision. Many employees see only their role in the organization, and cannot visualize the interrelatedness of the system.
- Truncated learning. Ghosts of learning programs past haunt new change efforts.
- Individualism. Our individualistic culture works against the collaboration and collective thinking necessary for LOs.
- Cultures of disrespect and fear block learning. Respect is the foundation of an intrinsically motivated workforce that is motivated to learn.
- Part-time and temporary workforce. They are cheaper, but more likely to leave and less motivated to commit to these personally challenging practices.

Even with these barriers, leaders still work toward the goal of becoming a learning organization. Whether it is declaring that they are on a path to becoming a LO, or adopting principles in alignment with the philosophy, leaders are investing in their employees for the sake of their followers' growth, and for the success of the organization.

This research looks at one organization's attempt to foster an environment that supports learning and growth. Recognizing the lack of research focused on leadership in LOs, it will analyze the leader's role in developing a learning organization through surveys, interviews, and focus groups with its leaders and student followers.

Organizational context

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) Outdoor Adventures (OA) program, within the Campus Recreation department, aims to engage individuals and groups in "adventure experiences for escape, education and enjoyment." OA uses adventure to enhance the student experience, expand and diversify student opportunities, and provide experiential education that accentuates lessons learned in the classroom. OA's success on campus was rewarded by a student led initiative to build the Outdoor Adventure Center (OAC), a new building on campus dedicated to the OA program.

Student trip staff is trained to plan and lead all OA trips, from one-day experiences to weeklong expeditions. They also teach academic classes and facilitate groups on the Challenge

Course (high ropes course focused on team building, leadership development, etc.). These students are not hired because they have all the required outdoor skills the job entails – they are hired based on their potential to grow in their human, educational and technical skills. They need to be organized, detail oriented, and proactive in their own development. On top of these responsibilities, students manage the bike shop, equipment rental and climbing wall year round. Students have many developmental opportunities to take advantage of, including:

- **Outdoor Leadership Seminar:** The primary training for all trip leaders, this is often a weeklong backpacking experience that is mentally, physically and emotionally challenging. Students are taught, and also teach outdoor and leadership skills, receiving detailed feedback on their human, technical and educational skills along the way.
- **Challenge Course Instructor Training:** Students learn to facilitate groups, from elementary school age to business leaders, on the course's "low ropes" games and initiatives, and "high ropes" course. In addition to technical skills, it is a sophisticated training in group dynamics, facilitation and experiential debriefing.
- **Wilderness First Responder:** an 80-hour medical training designed to teach students to make medical and evacuation decisions in the backcountry.
- **Site-management trainings:** Trainings that are more focused on leading trips in a specific area, like canoeing, rock climbing, cycling or backpacking. Student leaders teach human, technical and educational skills, and students receive detailed feedback on their work.

Working for OA is a deeper commitment than most student jobs. They commit time, but they also commit to embark on a proactive personal and leadership development program, join a community with high performance standards, and continually learn new skills and behaviors, opening themselves to failure and critical feedback along the way. The result is a unique environment for continuous learning.

OA leadership commits to creating a "growth environment" for their student employees, one where students are always learning, improving, and preparing the organization to adapt and change. This research looks into the overlap between OA's environment and the learning organization construct, and explores the role of OA leadership in developing that culture.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to assess how closely the perceptions of the leader and followers fit the descriptions of the learning organization, and understand what the leader does to influence that culture. While OA uses terms like a "growth environment", this research will apply the LO construct to OA's current culture and determine where there is overlap and discrepancy.

Hypothesis 1: UNL Outdoor Adventures exhibits the attributes of a learning organization.

Hypothesis 2: A leader's actions impact the organization's culture.

To test my hypotheses I will conduct an interview with OA's Director and a focus group discussion with student staff to determine how closely their perceptions of OA's culture fit the LO's attributes. To serve as baseline data that the focus groups and interview will contextualize,

I will have leaders and followers fill out surveys asking to what extent LO attributes are present at OA.

Since the goal of this research is to understand personal experience, values, opinions and social contexts within a specific organization, I chose to collect data through a qualitative research design. My objective is to describe a culture, from the leader and follower perspective, and hope to understand an organization's culture in its members' own words. I chose to do an in-depth interview with OA's leader to assess personal history, perspectives, and the connection between his leadership principles and actions, and how he perceives its impact on the organization. I chose focus groups for follower discussions because they are ideal for understanding cultural norms, the issues that concern the followers, and assessing how a leader's actions impact the work life of his followers. Both techniques were semi-structured, with pre-determined questions that often led to new areas of inquiry during the conversation.

To prepare the questions for the survey, interview and focus groups, I relied on the questions used in the Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) to assess the presence of LO dimensions in an organization (see Appendix A). Watkins and Marsick (2003) developed the DLOQ to measure the seven dimensions of a learning organization (see Table 1). The DLOQ's scales have proved consistently reliable above .70, and validity and reliability has been studied in several cross-cultural contexts showing internal reliability ranging from .71 to .91 (Song, Joo, & Chermack, 2009). Several types of subjects have participated in DLOQ studies to address its applicability to leadership, job satisfaction, and learning transfer in business, educational, and nonprofit sectors (Song, Joo, & Chermack, 2009). Since this is a case study, I am less concerned with its broad generalizability.

Table 1 describes Holyoke, Sturko, Wood & Wu's (2012, p.440) organization of the individual, team and organizational levels of a LO. I used this framework to organize questions for the interview and focus group.

Table 1: Individual, team and organizational dimensions of a LO

Dimension	Description	Survey Questions
Continuous Learning	Opportunities for ongoing education and growth are provided; learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do employees at OA get resources to support their learning? • To what extent are employees at OA given time to support learning? • To what extent are employees at OA rewarded for learning?
Inquiry and Dialogue	The organizational culture supports questioning, feedback, and experimentation; people gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do employees at OA give open and honest feedback to each other? • To what extent are employees at OA encouraged to ask "why" regardless of rank. • To what extent do employees at OA, when stating their view, also ask what others think.
Team learning	Work is designed to use teams to access different models of thinking; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded; teams are expected to learn by working together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do employees at OA treat members as equals, regardless of rank, culture or other differences? • To what extent OA teams revise their thinking as a result of group

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		<p>discussions or information collected.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do employees at OA rewarded for their achievements as a team.
Embedded Systems	Necessary systems to share learning are created, maintained, and integrated with work; employees have access to these high and low-technology systems	<i>Item analyzed through focus group discussion</i>
Empowerment	People are involved in setting and implementing a shared vision; responsibility is distributed so that people are motivated to learn what they are held accountable to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are employees at OA empowered to carry out the organization’s vision?
System connection	The organization is linked to its communities; people understand the overall environment and use information to adjust work practices; people are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do leaders at OA share current info about trends and organizational directions?
Strategic Leadership	Leadership uses learning strategically for business results; leaders model, champion and support learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do leaders at OA mentor and coach those they lead. • To what extent do leaders at OA continually look for opportunities to learn? • To what extent do leaders at OA support requests for learning opportunities and training?

Source: Holyoke, Sturko, Wood & Wu (2012) 440

Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded with the participants’ permission, and I received verbal informed consent. Study participants were chosen from the Outdoor Adventures staff. While there are three managers at OA, I chose the Director as my leader interview participant because of his extensive leadership experience, vision for OA, and interest in designing an organizational culture where students can grow. More than the Program Coordinators who share management responsibility, the Director’s role is to create and share the organizational vision.

Student focus group participants were selected based on availability. While student staff at OA consists of trip leaders and general staff, I chose to include only trip leaders in the focus group because they are eligible to receive all the developmental training OA offers.

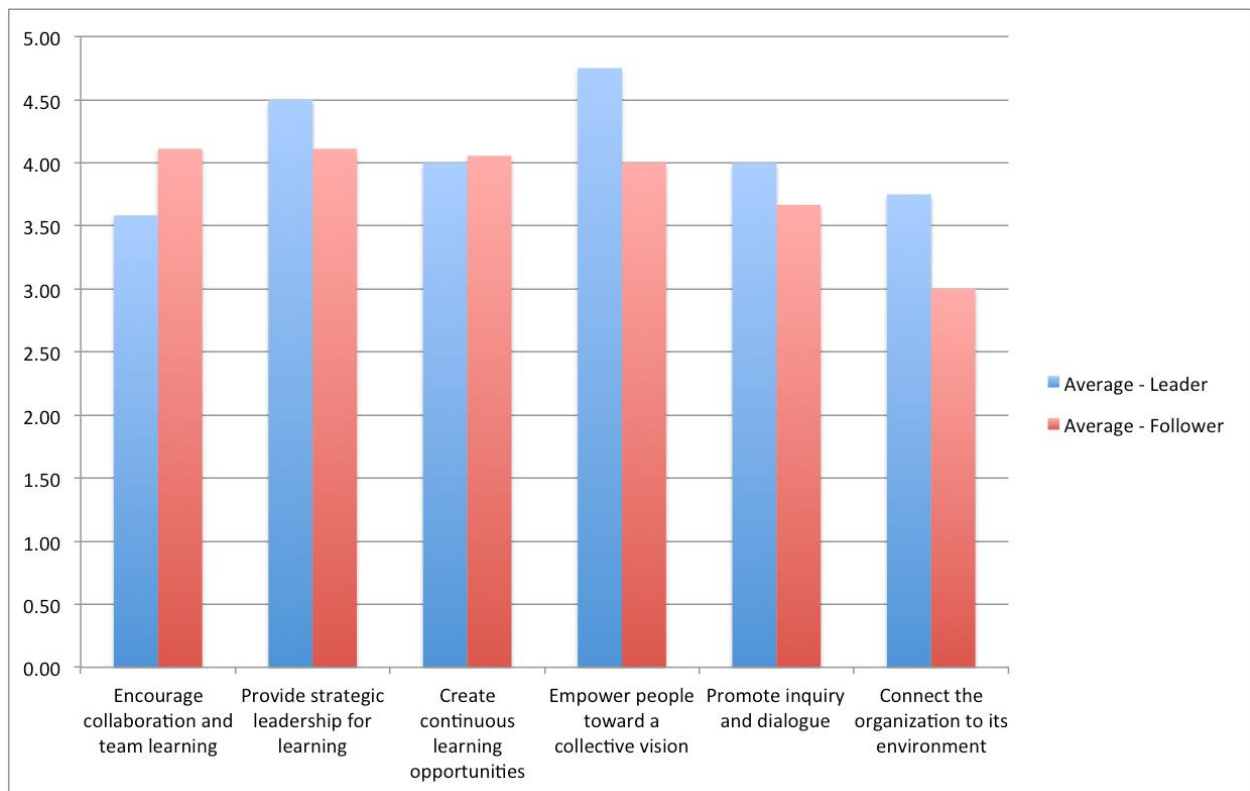
After transcribing the interview and focus group discussions, I organized responses into themes. I compared the perceptions of the leader and follower, looking for overlap and discrepancy, and I highlighted quotes that exemplified the leader or student perspective.

Findings

In addition to an interview with OA's Director, Jordan Messerer, I led two focus group discussions, talking to six total trip leaders. All four OA managers completed the LO dimensions survey, as well as the six students involved in the focus group.

Data from the interview, focus groups and surveys support this hypothesis; OA exhibits the attributes in the seven dimensions of a learning organization, though their attributes are stronger in some areas than others. Graph 1 depicts OA's above average results from the leader and follower perspective, when asked to what extent each dimension was present in OA. Context from the interview and focus group discussion will explore each dimension, including dimensions that exhibit a relatively large difference between leader and follower perspectives such as connecting the organization to its environment, empowering followers toward a collective vision, and encouraging team learning.

Graph 1: Survey results, Average Responses for LO Dimensions

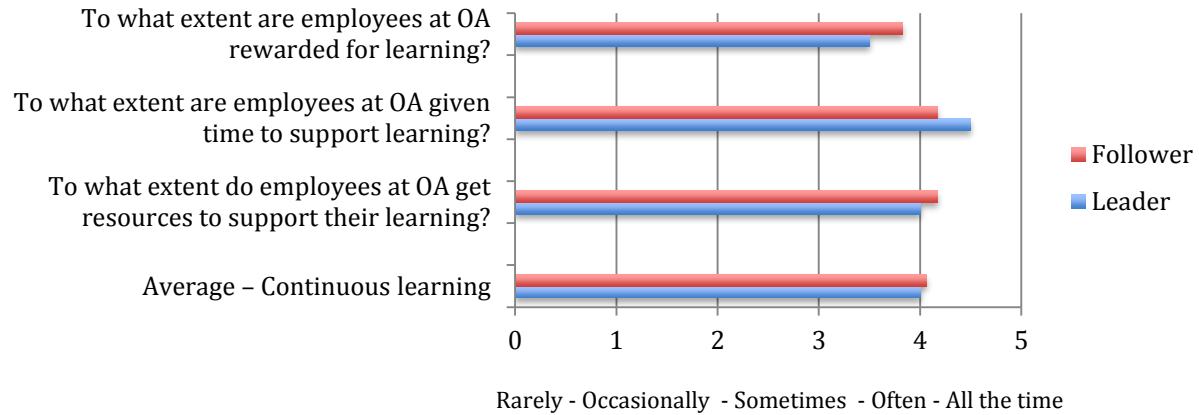


Hypothesis 2: A leader's actions impact the organization's learning culture.

Data from this case study also supports this hypothesis. Throughout the analysis, the distinct role of the leader in designing and maintaining a culture that supports learning and growth is present.

Dimension 1: Continuous learning

Opportunities for ongoing education and growth are provided. Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job.



Survey Results

In the continuous learning dimension, leaders and followers agreed that OA promotes continuous learning often. In this category, followers felt that they get time and resources to support their learning; leaders felt more strongly that they provide employees with time, more than resources to learn. Leaders and followers agreed that followers are occasionally to often rewarded for their learning. In addition to scoring strongly in this category, leaders and followers also agreed on the dimensions, potentially illustrating that the continuous learning framework is set for both leaders and followers.

Interview and Focus Group results

Leader Perspective

Jordan believes that curious learners are more invested in the organization, and students who buy-in learn and grow. To promote continuous learning at OA, he tries to create an environment that supports growth. This environment is tolerable of mistakes, provides a developmental path for employees, and provides opportunities to practice.

“Our program is unique. There are great leadership workshops all across campus and programs that do it, but the issue is, those intense experiences are like a firework. Poof! It’s awesome, then we put them back in their environment and let them go on without reflection. Our Outdoor Leadership Seminar (OLS) front-loads lessons for the next two years. That makes our leadership opportunities unique on campus. We’ll put students in leadership roles for the next two years, reflect on those experiences, and ask students to continuously improve.” - Jordan

OA leaders create opportunities for students to learn and reflect on those experiences. They also try to create an environment where failure is tolerated. Jordan said, “At OA, there is grace after mistakes, but I do expect that it will never be made again.” Tolerating and learning from failure is an organizational strategy – if an employee makes a mistake and you help them learn from it,

they will be a better employee and will not repeat the mistake. If you do not tolerate mistakes,

“Jacob Bronowski said, ‘True creativity is on the edge of uncertainty.’ You have to give people opportunities to get to that cutting edge.” - Jordan

the employee will take their new lessons to a different employer. In addition, if employees fear failure, they will avoid taking a risk to improve the program.

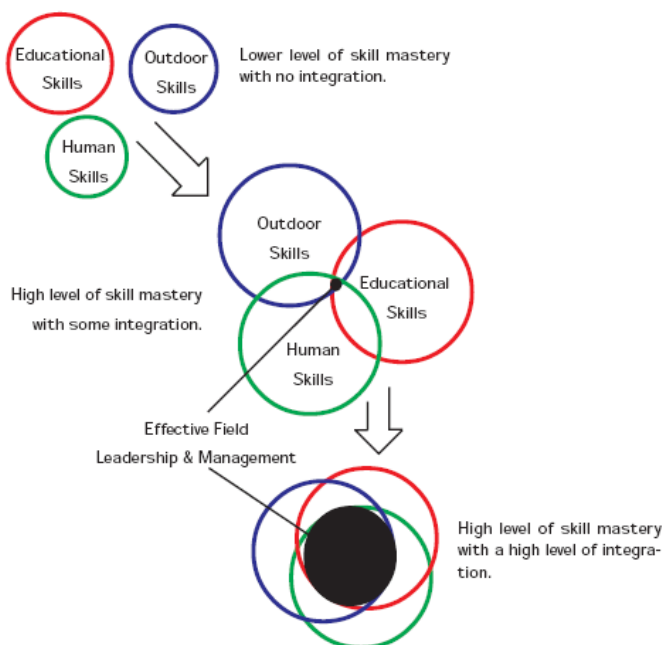
OA leaders expect staff to learn continuously, but they also provide a clear path to do so. They

use the Employee Development Program (EDP) so students know there is a clear process to improve and get promoted. Its main drawback is it requires a high level of self-motivation from the students. OA leaders assume students will take it upon themselves to learn what EDP requires and take the initiative to move up, but that motivation is not always there. Leaders tend to lead the process, telling employees it is time to move forward in the process. This is a real time investment for students. OA managers ask a lot of them, but also know that OA is their fourth priority after themselves, their personal relationships and their schoolwork.

OA organizes their learning expectations based on three essential outdoor skill sets:

- **Outdoor Skills:** OA trip leader has read organizational policies, has basic outdoor skill mastery, has specialized activity knowledge, applies risk management procedures, exercises quality judgment and decision making, demonstrates medical and rescue skill competency, and is able to read map and choose routes in the field.
- **Educational Skills:** OA trip leader understands different learning styles, adapts teaching style for different groups, understands the importance of modeling skills, provides clear feedback to help others grow, has fun while teaching, and is organized.
- **Human Skills:** OA trip leader takes ownership for their decisions, is prepared to lead, models expedition behavior, understands different leadership styles, leads within their limitations, and communicates effectively.

Image 1: Trip leader skill integration (Nicolazzo, 2007)



Students start to learn these skills on OLS and practice them throughout their employment with OA. To advance in the Employee Development Program, students start to integrate these skills (See Image 1).

When students start to master and integrate these skills, they can apply to be promoted from an earth, to wind, and eventually to a water leader. Water leaders become responsible for the vision and implementation of each trip.

Jordan admits that some students see EDP as a big obstacle, with too much challenge and not enough support to

succeed. To combat this issue, Jordan relies on OA's unique strength: the amount of opportunities students have to practice and reflect in order to move up within the EDP.

Follower Perspective

Followers agree that there are lots of opportunities to learn, such as using OA leaders as resources, discounted trainings opportunities like the Wilderness First Responder (WFR) course, skill specific trainings, and continuous opportunities to lead. While opportunities exist, students agreed that it takes a very proactive student to fully benefit from them.

“You get out of the program what you want – if you are proactive, you will get the training you need. If you go with the flow, you will miss out. Proactivity is essential. I've seen staff excel because they have asked for opportunities to learn. I've also seen staff that didn't look for those opportunities become stagnant and eventually quit.” – Student Trip Leader

In addition to proactivity, you need to invest time. One barrier to taking advantage of all the opportunities at OA is a lack of time. If you are proactive, and you dedicate time to OA, you will have a lot of learning opportunities.

One staff member is working with staff to help her balance opportunities at OA with

her other responsibilities. While she wants to take advantage of all the opportunities OA offers, she has a tendency to overcommit, and other parts of her life suffer for it. She believes if you cannot commit time, you miss out on future opportunities as well. While leaders take interest in students' personal learning goals, their ability to train students is usually tied to an urgent need within the program:

“Learning opportunities depend on the needs of the program. If they need someone to do something, the opportunity to learn that skill will be available. If that gap is already filled, then you won't receive that training. It's situational and outside the scope of an individual's learning plan – it's based on program needs. For example, I didn't know about cross-country skis, but I did well in the bike shop and I was available, so I learned how to wax skis. After I learned that, we didn't teach other people. I became the ski-waxer because of my availability – once that need was filled, the opportunity to learn that skill was not clearly available to others.” –Student Trip Leader

Leaders also take a personal role in employee development. The following quotes are examples of student learning processes, and the leader's role in that development:

“I was personally interested in rock-climbing. One of the OA leaders took note and showed interest in my learning. I was proactive with climbing, went to climbing site-management, and asked that OA leader to go on a personal trip to work on technical skills.”

“I was planning a bike trip to the San Juan wilderness with an OA leader. He gave me the reins and I learned all about trip planning. He gave me lots of feedback throughout, but ultimately gave me the freedom to plan this new trip.”

“I do more behind the scenes work at the climbing wall. I’m working to create a more inclusive culture there, and one OA leader checks my progress on climbing wall projects. He has helped me learn transferrable skills like project management and delegation. He also knows what I need as a learner – I need people to be interested in my personal life to do well, so he makes an effort to know what’s going on with me.”

Students discussed several techniques leaders use to promote and model continuous learning:

Testing and challenging

“Does he ever answer you without asking you a question?” Students recognize one leader’s ability to continuously challenge them to think through problems themselves before seeking help. Questions like “how would you do it?” empower employees to solve organizational problems as individuals and on teams.

Personal interests and relationships

“One leader knew I was personally interested in paddling. Outside of work we have personal conversations about our paddling trips – he’s interested in my experience outside of work, and that encouragement, shared excitement and shared passion motivates me to keep learning.”

Critical feedback

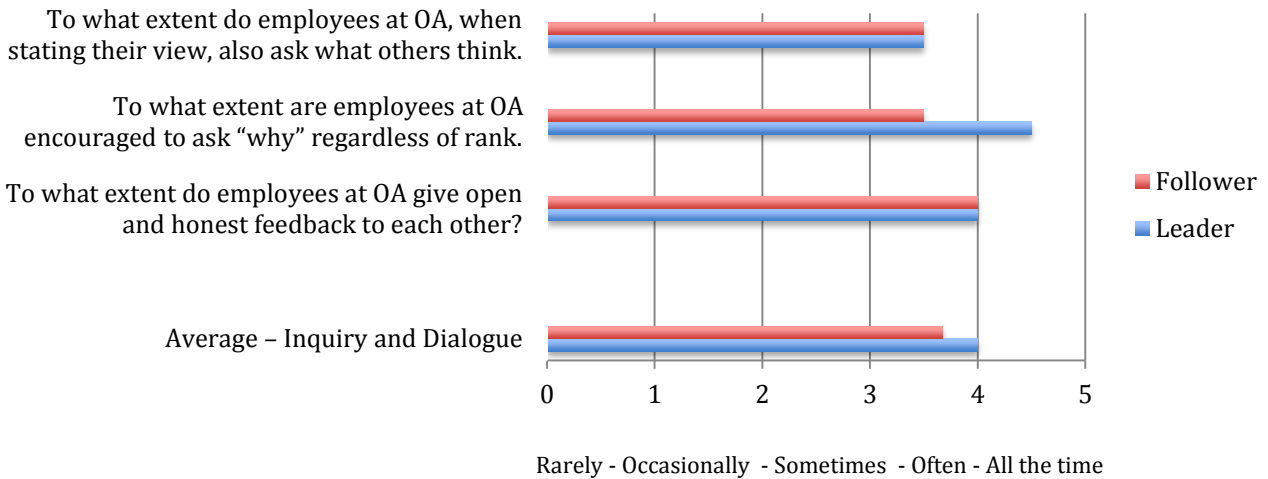
There is no shortage of critical feedback. It is expected that employees need to learn how to accept and apply it to their work. Sometimes it is interpreted as “being hard on students,” but employees ultimately understand the purpose of direct feedback for learning. Students said that they could handle any feedback from leaders they respect. One student clarified that “leaders aren’t being hard on you just to be hard on you. They want you to be better.”

One student addressed the importance of EDP in his growth and development as a trip leader. He said before EDP, people were rewarded for seniority alone. New staff rarely had opportunities to move up, and people who did invest enough time did not always know what was required to advance. When EDP was introduced, it provided a clear path for student improvement. He said the program was prioritized, and it reduced some individualistic complaints, usually focused on seniority.

The same student worries that EDP is not highly valued by current employees. He senses more students talking about seniority and experience as a basis for advancement, rather than the path set forth in EDP. Other students said that the EDP system is not very clear, and not consistently applied. Students agreed that the system is great, in theory, but can be confusing in practice.

Dimension 2: Inquiry and Dialogue

The organizational culture supports questioning, feedback, and experimentation; people gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others.



Survey Results

Leaders and followers agree that OA promotes inquiry and dialogue occasionally to often. Followers said they give open and honest feedback to each other often, and felt slightly less strong than the leaders that they are encouraged to ask “why” regardless of rank. Leaders agreed that employees give each other open and honest feedback, but felt stronger than employees that students are encouraged to ask “why” regardless of rank. This difference might mean that leaders feel like they have created an environment where employees can ask “why”, and share alternative views, but student employees might feel differently. Students might be walking the line between being respectful of the leaders’ decisions, and making their voices heard.

Interview and Focus Group Results

Leader

Jordan and OA leaders work to promote open reflection and feedback at OA, using Post-Trip Debriefing to help employees learn from their experiences. They rely on Kolb’s experiential model of learning. In traditional learning people are taught an abstract concept, they practice it, and they make new information. Reflection is the missing piece; that is why OA debriefs after every trip.

“Students only learn from mistakes if there is reflection. They need to understand why the mistake was made, and the consequences.”
-Jordan

The leaders value debriefing, especially after trips, and spend around one hour dissecting each trip after it is complete. Jordan said that this can be difficult because the students’ typical environment does not accept or address failure. In school, Jordan feels students no longer earn grades, they are given grades. There is an abundance of grade inflation

and an overreliance on positive feedback in school, which could make the critical feedback employees receive at OA seem blunt or harsh. After receiving feedback on actions

“We try to create a highly supportive environment, that also puts students in highly challenging situations.”
- Jordan

taken on a trip, some students shut down. Others thrive on Jordan's high expectations, and strive to achieve the new goals laid out for them.

Jordan became personally interested in growth and fixed mindsets, and has started to share these ideas with students to impact their mental models, and help them accept critical feedback as an opportunity to learn, rather than a critique of a student's character or identity as a leader. To further address the diverse reactions to direct feedback, Jordan refers to Sanford's (1966) student development theory, based on challenge and support. Pulling out a piece of paper, he drew this table:

Table 2: Student Development Theory

	High Support	Low Support
High Challenge	Opportunity for Growth	Threat or Retreat
Low Challenge	Confirmation	Static

Jordan supports student employees through education and training, emphasizing self-leadership and character development, and affirmation that they are students first, employees second. He works to create an environment that is high in challenge and support, so students will apply feedback effectively, not react defensively when they receive it.

"It comes back to creating a culture where it's ok to make mistakes." To foster that environment, Jordan admits mistakes when he makes them and highlight what he learned. "I don't pretend I'm perfect. I try to model learning from mistakes." - Jordan

Follower

Students agree that OA leaders are very "intentional" when it comes to designing the open environment at OA. They coordinate staff parties and events. When OA leaders and current employees hire new staff, they hire people who will move the program forward, and be someone "you want to hang out with." Students prioritize their relationships with each other and with the OA leaders. Students think that Jordan's focus on personal relationships lays the foundation for this open and relationship-focused environment.

In addition to speaking their mind, students feel comfortable discussing and learning from mistakes they have made on trips – "But it depends on how I messed up. If I was being an idiot, I would be ashamed and worried to share it. If it was an honest mistake, then I'm fine talking about it and learning from it." Students said that how you react to the failure is more important to OA leaders. It is important that you face it and try to fix it, rather than shutting down and being defensive. Students think leaders do a good job making failure productive:

"Based on other jobs I've had, I've never felt like I have as much say as I do at OA. Jordan created an open atmosphere where students can say how they feel, and that makes me really comfortable. When I worked at a restaurant, I would not feel comfortable giving my opinion." – Student Trip Leader

“When we were on a staff ski trip, I took off and skied ahead of the group. I might have been a bad idea, because it was night time and getting colder. Jordan helped me learn a lesson about keeping the group together. Overall it was a good learning experience.”

“Another leader and I drove back from a spring break trip at 2 a.m. in a snow storm. We decided to keep going but didn’t tell anyone about it. The leaders were upset, but it was a good way to talk about what to do differently next time.”

Dialogue is promoted in the form of feedback during trip debriefs. Leaders try to set the foundation by teaching trip leaders how to give and receive feedback. Students agree that they are there to learn and grow, and one of the best ways to learn is reflecting on experiences and accepting critical feedback. The leaders dedicate staff training to feedback and trip leaders are expected to give feedback after each trip. Students also do written evaluations to help each other grow, and they journal during trips to prepare for their post-trip debriefings.

“In other programs I’ve done where there isn’t a debrief, there isn’t learning. We keep making the same mistakes. When we debrief at OA, we just get better and better. It’s an integral part of our work.” – Student Trip leader

Students said that feedback and reflection are central to OA’s growth environment, but giving effective feedback is a skill they still need to practice. Dialogue is seen as an ideal to achieve, but it can break down in practice when employees do not respond well to the feedback. Alternatively, leaders can respond to a negative feedback experience between staff by keeping them apart on future trips, an action that does not help the students solve that problem. Students talked about relationships changing after debriefs when feedback

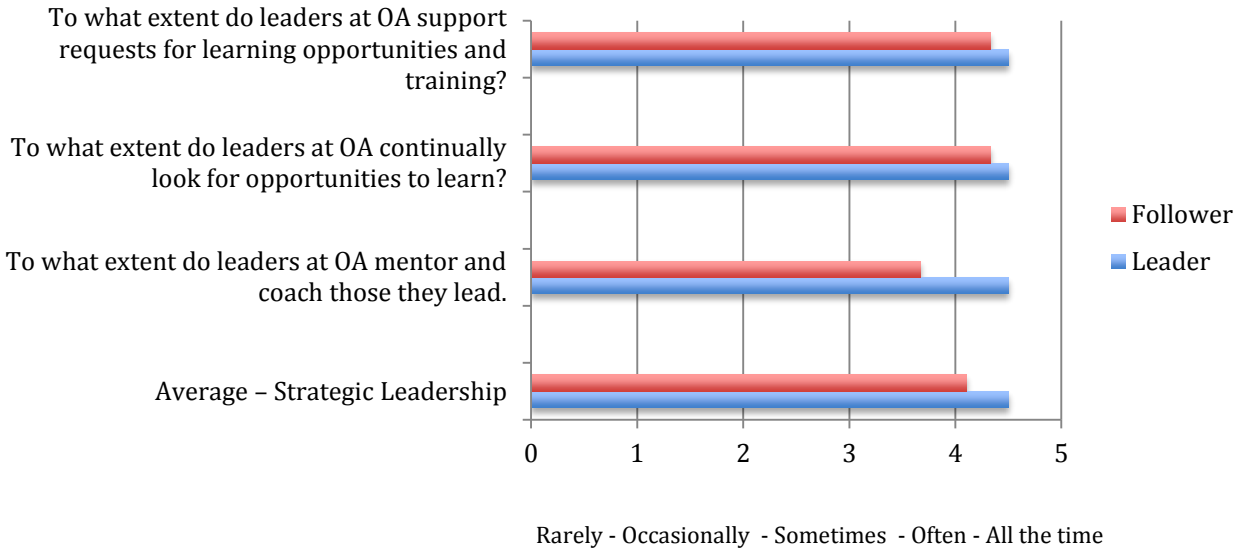
was perceived as particularly direct or harsh. Accepting feedback is often harder than giving feedback through open dialogue.

“Trip leaders get plenty of feedback, but I wish I received more feedback for continuous learning at Equipment Rental (ER). I would like to know what I’m doing well and what I can do better when running the facility as well.” – Student Trip Leader

“I am motivated to do well when I feel supported. If there is a strong relationship there, all critical feedback will be well received because I respect you and I know you respect me.” – Student Trip leader

Strategic Leadership

Leadership uses learning strategically for business results; leaders model, champion and support learning.



Survey Results

Leaders and followers both feel strongly that leaders support requests employee learning opportunities, and that leaders continuously look for opportunities to learn as well. Leaders felt slightly stronger and students that they mentor and coach their followers.

Interview and Focus Group Results

Leader

Jordan explained that as a department under Campus Recreation and Student Affairs, he has a responsibility to enhance student learning on campus. But beyond that, if he were running a for-profit recreation business, he would still invest in employees' learning processes. Jordan acts authentic, and seeks authenticity in his employees. He is also a relational leader, focused on developing personal relationships with his followers.

“My goal is to know what’s going on in people’s lives. If they come to me and say ‘I need this time,’ I want to let them take care of that issue. It’s naive to think that just because you’re paying someone that you have complete control of them while they’re on the clock. If the rest of their life is in shambles, you will not get the best out of them.” - Jordan

Jordan acts authentic, and seeks authenticity in his employees. He is also a relational leader, focused on developing personal relationships with his followers.

Jordan sees himself as a mentor to his student staff. Much of the student development work and debriefing discussions revolved around a Leadership Effectiveness Model that OA relies on (see Image 2). The model shows that

effective leadership is only possible when we can effectively lead ourselves. Jordan is willing to ask the personal questions that help students grow as effective leaders. If he had more time, he would invest more in building personal relationships with staff.

Image 2: Leadership Effectiveness Model



Four basic principles to follow:

I am not the teacher - My obligation is to learn - I see greatness - I build community

Source: The Choice in Teaching and in Education (2001), and The Anatomy of Peace (2007)

The model emphasizes four key lessons that Jordan reiterates through personal meetings with staff and trip debriefings:

1. Most time and effort should be spent at the lower levels of the pyramid.
2. One's effectiveness at each level of the pyramid depends on one's effectiveness at the level below.
3. The solution to a problem at one level of the pyramid is always below that level of the pyramid.
4. Ultimately, my effectiveness at each level of the pyramid depends on the deepest level of the pyramid – my way of being.

Follower

Students were thankful for the environment that supports feedback and dialogue, but several agreed that a strong relationship or mutual respect were necessary for feedback from OA leaders to be well received. When asked what makes them respect a leader, students talked about feeling support from the leader, feeling like they are interested in their lives outside of OA, recognizing the student's unique contribution to the organization, and thanking them for hard work. They also talked about "walking the walk." If they feel like the leader consistently reaches the high standards they expect of students, then feedback and direction will be taken and applied. Walking the walk could be when leaders continuously challenge themselves to keep learning, or follow the same rules and policies they expect of students. Students think that these attributes are mostly consistently present, but they would appreciate more positive feedback and thanks for hard work.

Part of strategic leadership is modeling learning as leaders. Students can sense Jordan's passion for paddling and biking. He does trips on his own, and aligns his personal life with his values. Student employees were impressed that OA leaders continuously seek new certifications and attend trainings. They also show trial and error.

"When we planned our work for Tour de Nebraska, even with Jordan's years of experience, there is always a learning curve. I got to watch him make mistakes, test new ideas, and learn as we went - He doesn't hide that process, and watching him do that is a good model for us."

Students feel like OA leaders are open to feedback. Employees can share their opinions, and those ideas are valued. While some feel uncomfortable giving leaders feedback without them requesting it first, the opportunity to shape the program exists.

OA leaders model continuous learning, but they also do their best to help students balance school, work and their relationships. Students agreed that this is a priority for the leaders, but admitted that they have been short staffed lately, so it has not been a high priority. If students are available in the summer, they will be asked to work. Students agreed that things will change when school starts, and OA leaders would never ask them to compromise their school work for their job at OA. One student started working with OA before Jordan was the Director, when balancing school and work was not as high a priority.

"I had a hard time balancing. I chose OA over school and relationships because I liked the work - I led every kind of trip: Paddling, backpacking, rock climbing and cycling. My schoolwork took a hit. When Jordan came on, he helped me prioritize and we decided I should only do cycling and backpacking trips. He helped me reprioritize, and consistently asks how everything is going in my personal life." - Student Trip Leader

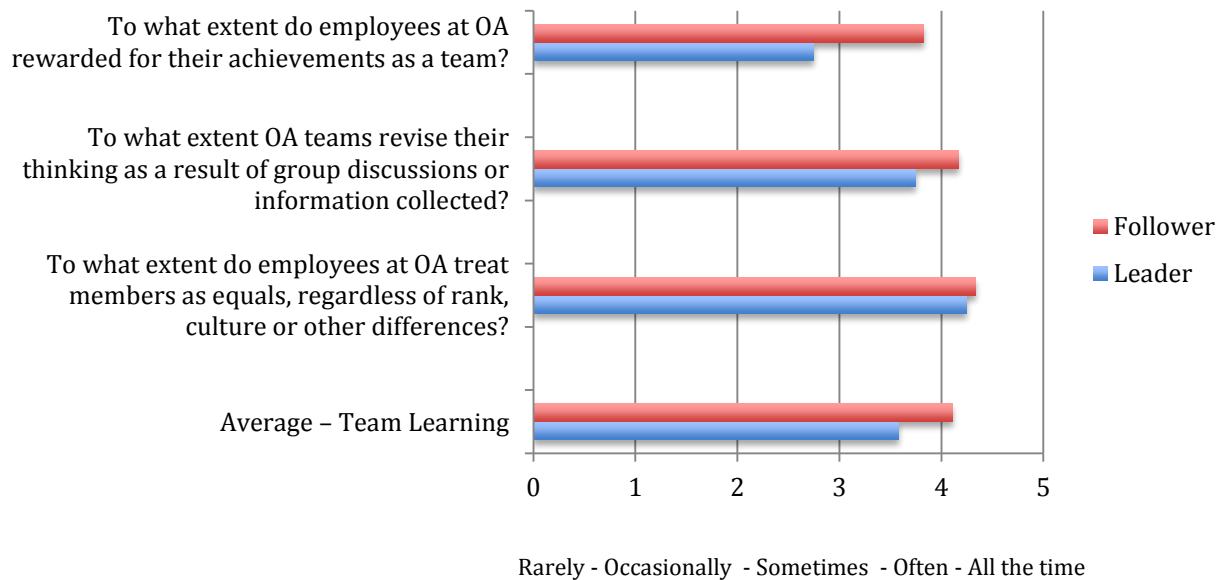
Leaders do not have to invest in their followers’ growth, but leaders at OA have adopted it as an important strategy for student development and success. When asked why they thought OA leaders invested so much in them, students have several ideas:

- “They want people to be invested in the program, so they invest in their employees. We need people who are committed and invested. To make a good program continue improving, we need people willing to invest a lot of time and energy.”
- “Because the leaders are good people. When you’re a good person, you care about the people you’re working with. If they had more time, they would get to know all the employees really well. Getting people invested in each other through strong relationships helps the program.”
- “They understand leadership theory. They value mentorship and helping others grow.”
- “They view themselves as educators first.”

Dimension 4: Team Learning

Work is designed to use teams to access different models of thinking; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded; teams are expected to learn by working together.

Survey



Survey Results

OA provides opportunities for people to learn as individuals and on a team. Individuals participate in site management trainings and first aid certifications, for example, and are critiqued individually. Teams of two-four students lead OA’s adventure trips, and are given feedback as a team and as individuals. According to the survey, OA leaders feel that employees are not often rewarded as a team, compared to employees who feel like they are pretty often rewarded as a team. Leaders are aware that they reward individuals, usually with more responsibility, rather than rewarding team efforts. Followers feel that they revise their thinking

slightly more often than leaders think they do, and leaders and followers generally agree OA treat each other as equals often to all of the time.

Interview and Focus Group Results

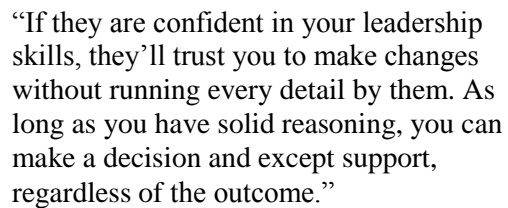
Leader

Jordan feels like he could reward students more often for their good work. Rewards at OA come in the form of faster advancement (which equals more pay), and more responsibility. He feels that more individual feedback is required to let people know where they are on their development path.

Follower

OA employees feel like leaders expect good work, and are not willing to reward students for meeting expectations. The reward comes in a “good job” for running a good trip. Some leaders reward staff with more personal lessons and more responsibility within the program, and with mentoring other staff.

Students feel comfortable adapting their plans with each other when they are in the field. As long as they have thought through the change in plans, and informed the OA leaders if necessary, the leaders will react with support. This trust from leaders starts with the Outdoor Leadership Seminar (see text box).



“If they are confident in your leadership skills, they’ll trust you to make changes without running every detail by them. As long as you have solid reasoning, you can make a decision and expect support, regardless of the outcome.”

Dimension 5: Embedded Systems

Necessary systems to share learning are created, maintained, and integrated with work; employees have access to these high and low technology systems.

Learning organizations have systems in place to capture and share learning. OA excels in making reflection an embedded part of their learning system, but sharing those lessons is a low technology process.

Leader

Jordan thinks that the lessons learned in debriefs are not consistently applied to future trips. The lessons stay with the leaders in that debrief, and might get passed on to others later. OA leaders ask them to talk about lessons learned at all-staff meetings, but personal lessons or lessons learned from mistakes are not discussed in that environment. Students just say it was a great trip and move on. Informally, Jordan thinks they hang out and share experiences, but there is not formal system for sharing lessons learned.

Follower

Followers expanded the topic of sharing knowledge beyond leading trips, to running the Outdoor Adventures Center’s Equipment Rental, Bike Shop and Climbing Wall. They described an informal system of passing down knowledge to future generations of OA staff (see text box).

“Everything we learn at OA is passed down from other staff. One training could not encompass everything you need to learn to work in equipment rental, so staff teaches staff what they know on an as-needed basis. Unfortunately there can be a ‘telephone effect.’ If I teach someone a little differently than another staff member would, suddenly our system is no longer consistent.”

Other students describe sharing lessons from trip reflection.

“When I learn a lesson on a trip, I bring it to the next trip I lead. I pass that knowledge to staff in similar situations, leading similar trips.” – Student Trip Leader

One veteran employee described OA’s past knowledge sharing system, saying it used to be more of a one-on-one mentor program with staff. One staff would be assigned a mentor. Now students are assigned “shadow shifts” to pick up skills, but they could learn from six different people over their training. He thought that learning from six people who do things slightly differently is harder than learning from one.

Dimension 6: Empowerment

People are involved in setting and implementing a shared vision; responsibility is distributed so that people are motivated to learn what they are held accountable to do.

Survey

Leaders and followers were both asked, “To what extent are employees at OA empowered to carry out the organization’s vision?” Leaders responded that followers were empowered almost all of the time, while followers felt they were often empowered to carry out OA’s vision. To understand whether OA leaders and followers were working toward similar missions, I asked Jordan to describe his vision for OA in five years. I also asked student employees what they thought Jordan’s vision was for OA.

Jordan’s vision	OA Staff response: What is Jordan’s vision?
<p>“We want to become more intertwined with leadership efforts on campus. When it comes to budget cuts, we want people to be able to highlight our integrated role on campus. We want a list of partners who view us as an essential part of their work, rather than a fun service that wouldn’t be missed.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He’s trying to impact student’s lives. • He’s helping students “chase their bliss” and exposing them to the joy you can feel when you accomplish something new. • He’s focused on bikes, trying to make UNL a more bike-friendly University.

Students seem to recognize pieces of OA’s overall vision, but do not regularly connect those actions with OA’s larger role on campus. Leaders might feel like they often discuss the vision of the organization with students, but something is stopping students from connecting their work to that broad vision.

Interview and Focus Group Results***Leader***

When asked whether students have bought-in to OA's vision, Jordan talked about his role in providing that big vision for the organization (see text box).

“Each student has their own vision, but it is my job to help them see the connection between fixing bikes and our essential role expanding transportation opportunities for students, for example. I try to help them see my excitement for our vision, and help them find connections between their work and OA's larger role on campus.” - Jordan

Jordan also involves students when brainstorming OA's direction. He tries to share ideas with students, asking them they think OA can contribute to the University's mission. Students are also involved in hiring new staff, a responsibility Jordan sees as a major contribution to the future of the program. Jordan values “getting the right people on the bus,” as they say in “Good to Great” (Collins, 1988), and he passes that value

on to his employees. Jordan admits that since moving into the new Outdoor Adventures Center, students have been overworked. They do not have as many opportunities to be creative and contribute to the long-term vision when their plates are so full.

Follower

As Jordan said, students have their own vision for OA in five years. Students want to see:

- An organized, intentional program
- A program with consistent policies and practices
- A program that leads and fills trips every weekend
- A social hub on campus
- A larger UNL presence where the majority of students know what OA has to offer.

Students said they feel connected to OA's vision when they step back from their daily tasks and think about their broader goals. For longer trips, it is easier to connect to OA's broader purpose because participants are ready for a deep experience, and leaders have more time to connect with them. Students know they are trying to craft an experience for people, and connect to the vision when they step back and realize how unique that opportunity is. The new facility also has employees thinking about where OA is headed, and many are proud that they were here when OA's new era began.

Dimension 7: System Connection

The organization is linked to its communities; people understand the overall environment and use information to adjust work practices; people are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire organization.

Survey Results

When asked “To what extent do leaders at OA share current information about trends and organizational directions,” leaders felt like they shared information occasionally to often, while followers thought that information was only occasionally shared. This is an interesting category, that might not be a good fit for a department within a University. The Outdoor Education field is

vibrant and changing, but part-time students working for OA for 2-3 years might not benefit from system connection. It is possible Jordan is focused on discussing OA's mission in the UNL context, instead of OA's mission in contexts broader than UNL.

Interview and Focus Group Results

Jordan shares OA's direction informally, through personal conversations with students, and formally at OA staff meetings. Students feel like the new building has made work more urgent, resulting in fewer conversations about OA's future. One student said that when he is asked to tell groups about OA, Jordan told him not to talk about the bike shop or equipment rental rates. "He wanted me to share OA's purpose and goals with the visitors."

Veteran staff have weekly meetings with leaders on a particular aspect of the program, and get heavily involved with its planning. However, some staff think that if they are not on one of those planning teams, they do not fully understand the thinking behind some of the leaders' decisions (see text box).

"I do not feel like I'm connected to OA's long term plan. I know the leaders have a vision, but I'm usually left in the dark until it's time to take action. I only see what's right in front of my face, not what the leaders see down the road. Sometimes I don't understand the reasoning behind some policies or decisions, but I learn after the fact what we're working toward."
 –Student Trip Leader

Discussion

"The learning organization is best thought of as a journey, not a destination; a philosophy, not a program" (Solomon 1994, as qtd. in Kerka, 1995). If a learning culture is a path, then UNL Outdoor Adventures has made a lot of progress on their journey. Without directly stating the goal of becoming a Learning Organization, OA has created a culture that values learning and growth in its employees. They do this because it is good for the students, but OA's leader also believes it is the best way to achieve organizational success.

Hypothesis 1: UNL Outdoor Adventures exhibits the attributes of a learning organization.

When asked about the existence of the seven dimensions of a LO, I never heard about a missing attribute. Through reflection, leaders and followers described dimensions that are particularly strong, and areas that are inconsistent, but never absent. Leader and staff participants are critical leadership and group dynamics thinkers, and had a lot to say about what the organization does well, and how it can improve. Through data organization and analysis, the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats emerged:

Strengths

- Sufficient challenge and support for growth
- Reflection is integrated with work
- Continuous learning and growth mindsets are promoted
- Open dialogue and feedback is a priority
- Embedded learning processes (EDP and Post-Trip Debriefs)
- Leaders reinforce learning by modeling continuous learning and building strong relationships with staff

Weaknesses

- Broad vision for OA disconnected from students' daily work
- Time barrier for part-time workers
- Low-technology knowledge sharing system
- Inconsistent rewards

Threats

- Diminishing focus on EDP, or student confusion about its role.
- Student tunnel vision
- Overworked, part-time work force
- Individual goals valued over organizational goals
- Heavy workload for leaders reduces relationship building and mentoring
- Heavy workload for students minimizes proactive learning and creativity

Opportunities

- Student to student mentoring
- Continuing to emphasize dialogue and feedback
- Student-initiated reward system
- Addressing OA's vision during fall all-staff meetings
- Broaden role as leadership experts and practitioners on campus

Leaders of LOs are designers, teachers and stewards. OA leaders are especially strong designers and teachers, maintaining a learning infrastructure that provides a supportive learning environment for students. Consistently providing opportunities for growth through challenging assignments, balanced with support through mentoring and personal relationships, makes the environment ideal for student growth. Continuous learning is an expectation for staff, and dialogue and feedback following student leadership experiences makes learning more likely. Processes and procedures for learning are in place in the form of EDP, and reflection is integrated with work through consistent post-trip debriefing meetings. Leaders model continuous learning in their personal lives and at work and try to build strong relationships with staff, an action that strengthens the supportive learning environment and makes it more likely that their critical feedback will be accepted and applied. Without trying to become a LO, OA leaders have designed an environment where learning is valued.

When assessed using the LO construct, one of OA's weaknesses is that the leaders' vision for OA is disconnected from student employees' daily experiences. Opening the new Outdoor Adventures Center has been stressful for all staff, and could explain this disconnect. Jordan said that students each have their own unique vision for OA, and the focus group discussions confirmed that; students are thinking about what they want to see from OA in the future, which is a good step to converging on a vision that the whole organization is behind. Connecting part-time student employees to an organization's vision is a big leadership challenge;

future research should explore the challenges involved with getting a part-time workforce invested in an organization's long-term vision.

There are some potential threats to OA's progress in creating a learning culture. While students are aware of EDP, it does not seem to be emphasized the way it has in the past, causing some confusion with students about how to advance. Post-trip debriefs are emphasized and consistently incorporated; if a similar emphasis was given to EDP, it is possible the students would take their progress into their own hands more often. Confusion about EDP might also cause individuals to value personal advancement over organizational needs. One student worried that OA was sliding back to a time where seniority or hours worked was most highly valued, rather than following the clear EDP guidelines.

Underlying all threats and weaknesses is an understanding that OA is experiencing a particularly busy time, with overworked leaders and part-time student staff. Overwhelmed workers could develop tunnel vision, where they focus only on the tasks in front of them and nothing beyond. OA has lofty goals for their organizational culture, and they already know the impact the heavy workload has on their ability to work toward long-term goals.

OA has several strengths that align with the LO construct, and there are also several opportunities to strengthen their learning culture. Since student employees can be overwhelmed by how much they have to learn at OA, leaders could streamline their low-technology, "oral history" system for sharing information with new staff. While this is a good way to share information given OA's emphasis on students' relationships with each other, it can be streamlined through a one-on-one mentoring system for new staff, rather than a ten-to-one ration of different leaders teaching new staff during shadow shifts. It could help build strong relationships and clarify lessons new staff are taught about running the OAC. Given OA's expansion and new building, leaders would have to assess whether a one-on-one mentorship program is possible with current staff levels.

OA can also continue to emphasize dialogue and feedback. Leaders have taught staff about how to give effective feedback; there is an opportunity to also teach how to receive feedback, and continue to practice those skills during debriefs. Students also seem to be concerned about the reward system at OA. While OA has done a great job establishing the foundation for reflection, feedback, dialogue and learning, some students wished there was more positive feedback, and thanks for good work. While reward systems can be tricky, it might be empowering for student leaders to design a reward system that works for them.

While Jordan works informally to discuss his vision for OA with students, he can emphasize it in all-staff monthly meetings during the school year. With the opening of the OAC behind them, he can jump start his discussions with staff about where OA is headed, and student staff's role in that process.

Hypothesis 2: A leader's actions impact the organization's culture.

Student focus groups and surveys show that OA leader impact the organization's learning culture in three main ways: Leaders design a supportive learning environment; they provide plenty of challenging learning opportunities with critical feedback; and they emphasize strong personal relationships with students.

Leaders design OA's supportive learning environment by modeling continuous learning themselves. They do not try to hide their own mistakes, and work to help students turn mistakes into learning opportunities through reflection and feedback. Thanks to leaders' openness, most

students feel like they have a say in OA's direction. One of OA's strengths are its embedded learning processes, especially their emphasis on reflection. It is not something leaders initiate after some experiences - it happens consistently and thoroughly. While students are still working on giving effective feedback and receiving it well, they agree that OA leaders emphasize open dialogue focused on learning. To further promote an open learning environment, OA leaders rely on a leadership effectiveness model that emphasizes self-leadership above all else. This focus makes it clear that the leaders care about the students personally. Two students identified the self-leadership concept as their most important takeaway from their years working for OA, learning that they cannot lead others until they can lead themselves.

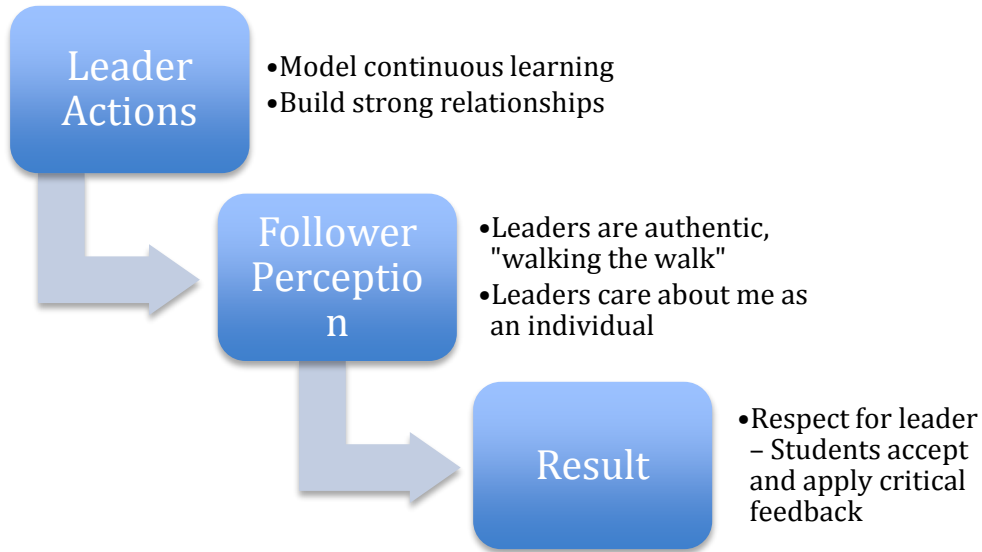
Emphasizing self-leadership and the leadership effectiveness model prepares students to take on challenging OA opportunities without fear. Students are repeatedly challenged as leaders. Once they have learned how to lead a trip, they are challenged to design a better trip. Then they are asked to help others grow as leaders. Leaders create opportunities and help proactive students move down their developmental path. Following these experiences, students meet with OA leaders to reflect on the effectiveness of the trip, their work as a leader, and their co-leaders' performances. No learning opportunities goes wasted, and leaders consistently push students to learn from experience.

Jordan and student employees refer to the importance of strong relationships and respect for the leader, drawn from "walking the walk" or authenticity, more than strategic leadership behaviors. Building strong relationships is one of OA leadership's strengths, though it is not often discussed in the LO literature.

Traditional LO literature focuses on leadership that uses learning strategically for improved performance. This research identified Authentic Leadership and LMX, rather than strategic leadership for learning, as the main factor that influences the LO culture. Joo (2012) looked into how leader-member exchange (LMX), mediated by LO culture, impacts organizational performance. LMX has three stages – initiating role expectations; mutual trust, loyalty and respect; and commitment to organizational goals. Jordan successfully engages students in the first two stages. Students have an abundance of loyalty and respect for Jordan and the other leaders. Jordan can take LMX further by getting students on board with the organization's goals.

Students discussed the role of the leader in accepting and learning from leader feedback. They said they accept feedback from leaders they respect, and that respect comes from authenticity and strong relationships, depicted in Graphic 1.

Graphic 1: Leadership influence at OA



In addition to strong relationships with followers and authentic relationships, Jordan emphasizes “getting the right people on the bus” (Collins, 1988). He hires students for their growth mindset, their potential for growth and their goal to help the organization in addition to themselves. He shares this mindset with students, and it establishes a shared understanding that individual growth should happen, but students should also focus on their role helping OA move forward.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

The case study research design has inherent limitations. Its purpose was to understand one organization and draw potential lessons for future research, rather than generalize to other organizations. My sample size was also small, with only one leader interview and six students involved in focus group discussions. While I was aware of the potential impact my conceivable bias as a trip leader for OA, I attempted to remain objective throughout.

Most LO research is done in organizations with full-time staff, but I applied the same construct to students working part-time. While LO attributes exist at OA, applying the same standard to a part-time student workforce might be unfair. First, OA employees only work part time, and rarely more than three years in a row. By the time they are graduating, they are just getting ready to take full advantage of OA’s opportunities. Second, OA might have a better chance of success because they employ students, and they are part of the University. OA leaders see themselves as outdoor educators, so they integrate learning naturally into their leadership. More research needs to be done on LOs on University campuses, and the impact of a part-time workforce on the leader’s challenge to design and lead a LO.

Future research could apply the DLOQ to everyone in the organization, gathering a broader sample of students. It could also compare OA’s learning culture to different student workforces on campus to highlight their unique strengths. I would have liked to interview all four leaders as well. Throughout the research it became clear that one leader does not design a whole organization – it is the result of the different strengths and tactics of all managers, though the Director does have more opportunities to shape and share the organization’s vision. Further

research could attempt to identify the impact of different leadership styles on learning culture. This case study identified the impact of LMX and authentic leadership on LO culture as potential research concentrations.

Conclusion

OA has many strengths, especially in creating learning opportunities, promoting dialogue and feedback, embedding learning processes and procedures and providing leadership that supports learning. Rather than an organizational overhaul or redesign, some areas can be tweaked or reemphasized to improve an already successful design. To build on their strengths, OA can work to connect employees to the organization's vision, clarify and consistently emphasize the EDP process, and streamline the student-to-student mentoring process. While many organizations would be immensely challenged to establish a learning culture in their organization, OA's strong leaders and dedicated student staff can move OA further down the path toward alignment with the LO construct.

Though I will not try to generalize OA's success and claim it would work for all leaders, OA's work provides some examples of how to integrate learning organization attributes into their management practices. First, public administrators asked to lead their departments can create a supportive learning environment, modeling the process of sharing crazy ideas, and supporting others who show their true selves at work. These environments balance challenge and support. With high challenge and low support, employees will shut down. Low challenge and high support leads to boredom. Balancing the two by giving employees opportunities to stretch, but supporting them along the way, makes growth possible.

Second, public leaders can integrate learning procedures and processes into daily work. Employees often have too much to do, cutting any time they might have to reflect and learn on their experiences. Employees should have the opportunity to practice new skills, receive feedback on their performance, and reflect on what they have learned. It should not just be a recommended practice – it should be an essential part of the organization's processes.

Last, public managers can diversify their leadership styles. While leaders often have an inherent style, it helps to understand when other styles could improve the work environment. OA leaders focus on relationships with student employees, resulting in high Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and employee trust and loyalty. Leaders are also authentic, often doing the same work that they ask students to complete. Employees also respected leaders who "walked the walk"; public leaders can authentically interact with employees, removing unnecessary hierarchy when possible.

Human resources professionals have a role to play as well. Expanding their role beyond policy implementation and monitoring, HR can strengthen the philosophical foundation that their organization hires people interested in learning and growth, rather than only looking for the most talented employees. 'Getting the right people on the bus' is the essential first step in LO design.

Public organizations want to hire productive employees. Workers, especially millennials, are looking for meaningful work that provides a safe learning environment, supported by leader coaching and feedback. While the LO construct can seem abstract, learning from organizations like OA that value learning and follower growth can provide practical examples for turning LO ideals into management practices.

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Appendix A: Dimensions of the Learning Organization descriptions and questions

Level	Dimension	Description	Survey	Focus Group Questions	Interview Questions
Individual	Create continuous learning opportunities	Continuous opportunities are provided for people to learn on the job; Opportunities for ongoing education and growth are provided; learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job.	On a scale from 1-5: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do employees at OA get resources to support their learning? To what extent are employees at OA given time to support learning? To what extent are employees at OA rewarded for learning? 	<p>Do you feel like you have opportunities to learn continuously with OA? -Give examples -How does Jordan help you pursue continuous learning?</p> <p>Do you feel like you can openly discuss mistakes or failures and learn from them? -Give examples -How does Jordan react to mistakes?</p>	<p>What do you do to create continuous learning opportunities for your staff? -Give examples</p> <p>How do you perceive and handle mistakes or failure in your staff? -Give examples</p>
Individual	Promote inquiry and dialogue	The culture supports people's sharing of views, questions, feedback and experimentation ; people gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do employees at OA give open and honest feedback to each other? To what extent are employees at OA encouraged to ask "why" regardless of rank. To what extent do employees at OA, when stating their view, also ask what others think. 	<p><i>Dialogue means people are free to explore issues without fear of judgment, and deeply listen to others' views. Its purpose is to explore. Defensiveness is avoided. Discussion is where views are presented and defended to make a decision. Its purpose is to decide.</i></p> <p>Is dialogue promoted in OA? -Give examples</p> <p>What is the role of reflection and feedback in the organization? -Give examples</p>	<p><i>Dialogue means people are free to explore issues without fear of judgment, and deeply listen to others' views. Its purpose is to explore. Defensiveness is avoided. Discussion is where views are presented and defended to make a decision. Its purpose is to decide.</i></p> <p>How do you promote dialogue in OA? -Give examples</p> <p>What is the role of reflection and feedback in the organization? -Give examples</p>
Team	Encourage collaboration and team learning	People are expected to learn and work together; collaboration is valued and rewarded; Work is designed to use teams to access different models of thinking.	In my organization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do employees at OA treat members as equals, regardless of rank, culture or other differences? To what extent OA teams revise their thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected. To what extent do employees at OA rewarded for their achievements as a team. 	<p>When you are leading a trip on a team of leaders, do you feel comfortable adapting plans as needed? -Give examples</p> <p>Do you feel like teams are rewarded for their accomplishments, or are individuals? -Give examples</p>	<p>How do you encourage trip leading teams to adapt plans as needed? -Give examples</p> <p>Are teams rewarded for their accomplishments, or are individuals? -Give examples</p>
Organizational	Create systems to capture and	Technology allows people to share learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 	When you learn a lesson on a trip or at work, how do you share that wisdom	How do students share what they have learned with each other?

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	share learning	and is integrated with work; Necessary systems to share learning are created, maintained, and integrated with work; employees have access to these high and low-technology systems.		with other trip leaders? -Give examples	-Give examples -
Organizational	Empower people toward a collective vision	The organization shares a collective vision with its members; people participate in developing and implementing the vision; responsibility is distributed so that people are motivated to learn what they are held accountable to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are employees at OA empowered to carry out the organization's vision? 	What is your vision for OA in 5 years? How is your work as an individual connected to OA's long term vision and goals?	What is your vision for OA? Has the staff bought into the vision? How so?
Organizational	Connect the organization to its environment	The organization is connected to its internal and external environments; people see and respond to these connections in their work; The organization is linked to its communities; people understand the overall environment and use information to adjust work practices; people are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire organization.	In my organization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do leaders at OA share current info about trends and organizational directions? 	Do OA leaders keep you up to date on organizational directions and industry trends? -Examples	How do you keep staff in tune with industry trends and organizational directions? -Examples
Organ	Provide	Leaders model	In my organization:	Do OA leaders model	How do you model

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<p>izational</p>	<p>strategic leadership for learning</p>	<p>and support learning; strategic leadership is used to move the business forward; Leadership uses learning strategically for business results; leaders model, champion and support learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do leaders at OA mentor and coach those they lead. • To what extent do leaders at OA continually look for opportunities to learn? • To what extent do leaders at OA support requests for learning opportunities and training? 	<p>continuous learning? -Examples - Are you able to balance school, work and relationships? -Examples Why do you think OA leaders value your learning and growth?</p>	<p>continuous learning? How do you help employees balance school, work and relationships? Why do you value learning and growth in your employees? (Meaning - Is it for their personal gain, or for the organization's goals?)</p>
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