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## Adult Education & Participant Empowerment for Organizational Transformation: a Learning Organization Case Study Introducing an Integration Model & a Strategic Empowerment Tool

Soni Simpson  
*DePaul University*

Elizabeth Londo  
*Ealong Corporation*

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# **Adult Education & Participant Empowerment for Organizational Transformation: a Learning Organization Case Study Introducing an Integration Model & a Strategic Empowerment Tool**

Soni Simpson, DePaul University, USA

Elizabeth Londo, Director of Organizational Development, Edlong Corporation, USA

**Abstract:** Aligned organizations of empowered, diverse learners are positioned to achieve shared objectives while responding to marketplace changes. Two models, the Integration Model & Annual Strategic Empowerment Tool, encourage systemic transformations. Using these models, engaged employees co-create and achieve strategic objectives through full integration with the annual performance management system.

## **New Models Fill a Practical Void**

Effective management education creates empowerment and improves the organization's capacity for aligned strategic action. In today's society, organizations are faced with

- the unique issue of employing a highly diverse workforce including racial and gender differences as well as four generations in the workplace,
- significant transfer-of-training issues to ensure retention of learning and application of training,
- the challenge of becoming true learning organizations in order to compete effectively while providing employee voice and empowerment.

Although there are models that deal with adult learning in the education fields and models that deal with individual aspects of effectiveness within organizational behavior literature, there are no models that integrate the true principles of adult education to provide employee empowerment and voice to systemic organizational transformation. These new models can enhance learning in all organizations.

## **Case in Progress**

This learning program was initiated with a family-owned business-to-business company that had some confusion about how they went to market. They had sold a particular type of product for more than 40 years and identified themselves as a specialty manufacturer. However, their customers knew them by the level of service they provided, including their responsiveness to unique requests, their lack of minimum orders, and their personal touch. The company's employees displayed wide diversity in race, gender, and age, and recent hires worked side-by-side with employees that had been there for decades. Some of the company's scientists were driven by data and scientific principles, while others considered themselves food artists. The company's marketing and sales force focused efforts on meeting the evolving needs of a wide variety of types of customers at different phases of their own product life cycles.

These philosophical differences were compounded by a diverse leadership group grappling with a newly evolving power structure influenced by the recent death of the founder,

new outside hires in management and leadership positions, and major life-issues several key family members and the trainer faced including a move, grief, illness, pregnancy, and a divorce. Of course, in a family business, the founder's family issues are reflected in the company's culture and impact all employees at some level. The challenge the training program was designed to address was to articulate the philosophical differences among management, and then co-create a shared brand philosophy and go-to-market strategy that drew upon the strengths of this diversity.

### **Bases for Model Development**

The Integration Model & the Annual Strategic Empowerment Tool were both developed for a corporate-wide strategic brand integration course. There were no learning models available that effectively promoted organizational change with collaborative participant empowerment. The specific challenge in this case study was developing an organization-wide culture shift through 1) a learning program with reinforced transfer-of-training and 2) a program for providing voice and relevance to each employee regardless of level, type of learner, type of worker, or individual differences. All employee/participants were seen as valuable in the transformation process. In order for the company's culture to transform it was imperative that learning transfer into hands-on relevant action. Specifically, this unique learning program successfully tied employee training and empowerment to organizational goals and individual performance management to better ensure employee voice and democratic transformation. The following highlights the program design, briefly describes the program's link to adult learning theories, and provides a brief introduction to the models. See Exhibits 1 and 2.

### **Organizational Learning Program Design for Transformation & Model Elements**

With the understanding that organizational transformation is symbiotic with individual transformation and empowerment, we initiated a learning program that engaged employee expert knowledge from all organizational levels, all four generational age groups, and addressing several learning styles, using the following interactive methods:

*Phase I: Democratic Learning from the Ground Up.* Four one-day learning sessions with a multi-level planning team introduced democratic principles, addressed multiple learning styles, and examined customer-focused brand management theory, including case study, critical reflection of business issues, and brainstorming.

*Phase II Employee Empowerment Linked to Goal Setting.* All group learning was incorporated into the development of a corporate strategic plan using democratic principles of employee empowerment. Learning & input sessions were held for the entire corporation.

*Phase III Performance Management Linked to Strategic Plan Empowerment.* The existing performance management system was incorporated into the 2008 strategic plan. Each strategy, tactic, and objective was assessed for measurability and assigned to all employees as part of their 2008 performance objectives. Additionally, each employee ensured their performance objectives were directly aligned to the plan.

*Two Model tools developed and utilized.* Two practical training tools were developed in the process. Visual graphics of each model as well as proven practical application of these models and their elements will be provided in detail in presentation.

*The Integration Model* developed ties organization values to a triangular relationship between employees/members, customer relationships, and organization systems. This relationship sits on a background of organization culture that is influenced by leadership. Each element of the model was developed in collaboration as a basis for member voice and empowerment in the organization's transformation. The Integration Model created provided a platform for dialogue between these diverse groups on how to best transform the organization to comply with the standards of the industry while continually evolving to meet customers' changing needs. See Exhibit 1.

*The Annual Strategic Empowerment Tool* links the democratically created strategic plan to individual member development. This tool is an arrow moving the organization forward. It ensures the transfer-of-training by specifically tying each organizational goal to each member's role in organization transformation. These goals and roles are created in collaboration, increasing ownership, buy-in and effectiveness. The Annual Strategic Planning Tool was developed to capture the dialogue in a way that could be operationalized by the organization in the coming year. It included the hypothesis that these changes would improve organizational results. See Exhibit 2.

### **Adult Education & Organizational Behavior Theory Informed Learning Program & Models**

In addition to using our combined 40 years of experience in the fields of organizational development, adult education, and training, we reviewed significant bodies of literature and evaluated several schools of thought as we developed and applied these new models. A brief summary of important sources follows:

- *Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill's Discussion & Democratic Classroom Theories* recognizes the importance of learner voice and effective discussion as a learning method.
- *Malcom Knowles' Androgogy Adult Learning* offers a learner-centered/directed model of instruction with learner viewed as a mutual partner to designing learning activities.
- *Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences* champions practical or real-world intelligences;
- *Peter Senge's and Watkins & Marsick's Learning Organization* defines a learning organization as one that learns continuously and transforms itself in response to the external environment within which it thrives. According to these principles, learning takes place in individuals, teams, in the organization and even in the communities with which the organization interacts.
- *On-The-Job Social Learning* takes into account the importance of the person, understanding that people learn and develop thought patterns through observation of others in a social environment. Three key components are vicarious learning, self-control, self-efficacy.
- In *Social Theory*, the program focuses on attention (model stimuli and trainee characteristics), retention (coding, organization and rehearsal), motor reproduction

(capability, accuracy, feedback), and motivational processes (reinforcement). Models were used pervasively as stimuli, trainee characteristics were taken into account, and rehearsal and reproduction were used to increase retention, accuracy of learning and feedback. Additionally, reinforcement through linkage to the performance management system was incorporated into the final transfer of training.

- *Motivational Goal Setting* assumes a person's behavior results from conscious goals and intentions. Thus, using group democratic decision-making methods to develop achievable goals is imperative for empowerment.
- *Critical Reflective Thinking* is built upon critically examining assumptions and beliefs from which an individual or an organization's behavior is based. Participants are encouraged subtly and sometimes explicitly to question how they view their industry, customer and corporate identity.

### **Case-in-Progress Lessons Learned, Results-To-Date, and Implications Going Forward**

The learning program that was developed launched 2008 as a year when dialogue and learning were already a part of the culture. Several new ad hoc groups were initiated to benchmark and manage key metrics for the organization and to continue to deepen cross-functional relationships with the intention of increasing efficiencies and improving customized service levels simultaneously. As a result, reliable key metrics have been established and organizational results have continued to improve throughout the year. The crux of this change occurred through the simple medium of strategic conversations designed to further the achievement of a shared objective.

This approach has become systemic; it is now being used to address obstacles to achieving shared goals and to continually refine methods for working towards achieving the strategic plan. In 2008, the company fell short of its goals--but it did grow, at a time when the industry was experiencing significant setbacks. Most other companies reported lowered revenues from the prior year. In 2009, they continue to build on the results of the last year and, if they continue on the current trajectory, will be even more successful in achieving shared objectives.

The integration model illustrates that an organization has essentially three main levers with which to strategically respond to the marketplace. Strategic initiatives will impact either customers, employees, or the systems and processes in place. If you approach strategic planning with this simple approach significant improvements in operational efficiencies and improved organizational results can be achieved. In a sense, this is the rudder the Titanic needed.

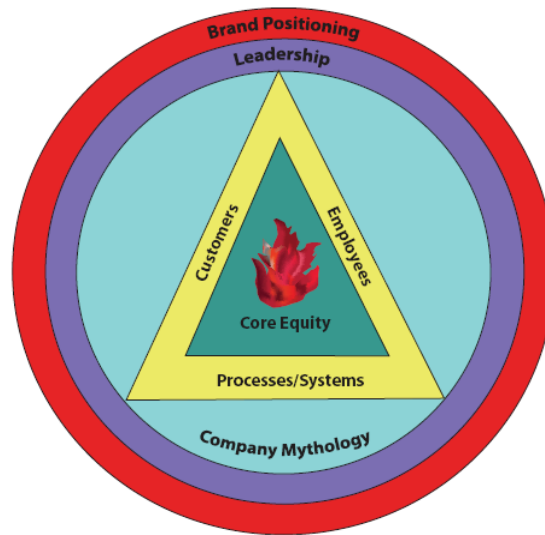
A diverse company facing a multitude of challenges is fraught with variables that may affect the outcome in invisible ways. It would be interesting to try these two models with start-up companies with a few employees. The models can provide the framework for conversations about systems and processes, desired employees and key customers and the Annual Strategic Empowerment Tool can be used to capture the conversations as objectives for the coming year. A Strategic Plan is a vision of a desired future and the particular strategies hypothesize about the best route to that desired outcome. Linking the tactics to the employees through performance management can create in smaller companies a laser-focused common intention to work together to remove obstacles and thus achieve a shared dream. The marketplace is undergoing an unprecedented transformation, and these two models may help to create a more level playing field for organizations at differing levels of complexity.

## Implication for Adult Education in Organizational Settings and Relevance for Adult Learners

Organizations are legal entities comprised of a number of individual learners of all types and levels. We hypothesize that organizations with a wide learning program and co-created transfer-of-training mechanism built from shared understanding and empowered with tools to assess their situation will be more effective and will experience improved results. The following models created aid in setting strategic priorities. They also visually link the relationships that are fundamental to success. We also believe that facilitating understanding of how to use these models through organization-wide large and small group guided learning sessions is an important component in taking learning to practical, relevant action.

In conclusion, this learning program utilizing two new models was truly a marriage between practical experience, conceptual academic material and immediate organizational challenges. These models have proven versatile and have application across a broad range of organizations seeking participant voice and ownership in healthy change. Additionally, this case study of a diverse, urban manufacturing company addresses challenges and opportunities for the education of adults in an organizational setting with a highly diverse membership. In short, this program met the challenge of utilizing a learning program to facilitate individual and organizational transformation.

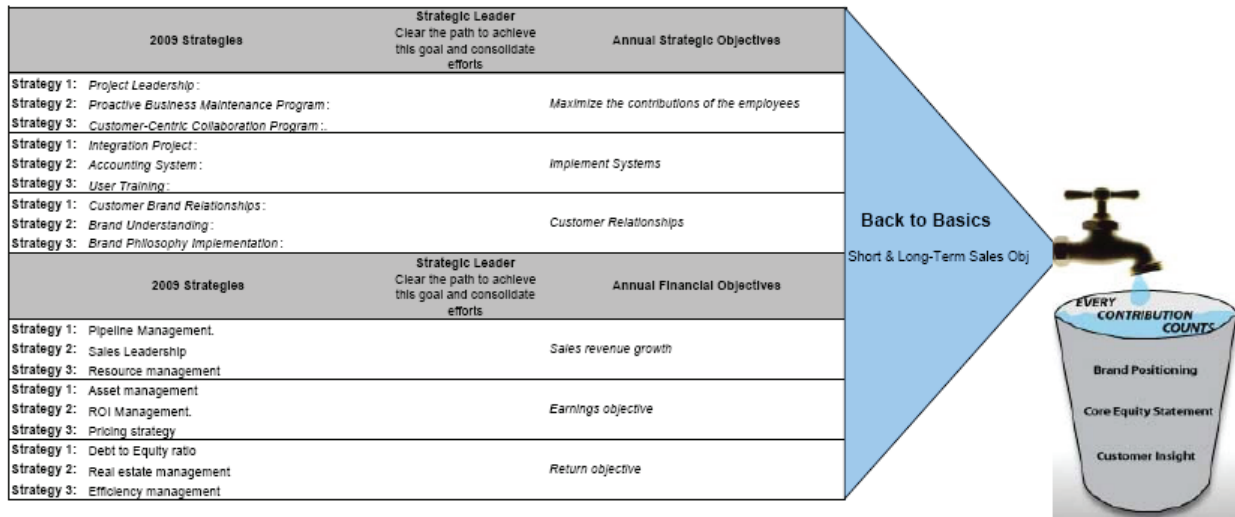
### Integration Model: Seamless Handoffs



Financial Result Will Determine the Size of the Circle

### EXHIBIT 1: Integration Model

## Exhibit 2: The Annual Strategic Empowerment Tool



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