


Learning Organizations

 Austin, M. J. (2008). Strategies for transforming human service organizations into learning organizations: Knowledge management and the transfer of learning. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 5(3-4), 569-596.

WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This article analyzes the research regarding the transformation of human service agencies into learning organizations. The article explores the nature of learning organizations, evidence-informed practice, elements of knowledge management, and the transfer of learning process in for-profit, health care, and nonprofit settings.




WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

A learning organization creates, collects, and shares knowledge, synthesizing the new knowledge to enhance the agency and staff effectiveness. Learning organizations focus on innovation, continuous growth, collaboration, strategic thinking, and staff development and team building. A learning culture can be fostered by sharing information, encouraging group-work, initiating peer mentoring/coaching systems, developing growth plans, and engaging in cross-training. Cultural transformation is an ongoing process that occurs at individual, group, and organizational levels. It may start with a small group creating a model for others to follow. There are many things managers can do to help transform their agencies into learning organizations:

PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGERS TO HELP TRANSFORM AGENCIES INTO LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

1. Treat your organization as a work in progress or unfinished prototype (strive for a balance between knowing and doubting, act on the best available evidence, and keep updating, continuously creating conditions for learning more).
2. See yourself and your organization as outsiders do (excessive optimism or indifference can cause people to downplay or not see risks and to persist despite evidence to the contrary).
3. The best diagnostic question is "What happens when people fail?" (There is little learning without identifying and understanding mistakes, errors, and setbacks; when something goes wrong, people face the facts, learn what happened and why, and keep using those facts to make the system better—treating the organization as a work in progress).
4. No brag, just facts (people hold each other accountable for saying things that correspond with the facts and will act on the best facts even when they are painful to hear).
5. Master the obvious and mundane by learning from others (when considering a new program or practice, find out if others have gathered evidence elsewhere about when, where, and why it works; seemingly trivial things can make a big difference).
6. Evidence-informed management practice is not just for senior executives (everyone has the responsibility to gather and act on quantitative and qualitative data and then share what they know so that others can learn; when managers support employees as if a big part of their job is to invent, find, test, and implement the best ideas, managers make fewer mistakes, organizations learn more, and more innovation can take place).
7. If all else fails, slow the spread of bad practices (when faced with pressures to implement something that is untested or known to be ineffective, evidence-based misbehavior may involve ignoring orders, delaying action, or incomplete implementation, and may be the best that can be done for the organization at the time).
8. Power and prestige can make you look stubborn, stupid, and resistant to valid evidence (failure to never admit an error; not knowing something, or possessing a shred of doubt; neglecting to build upon the organizational lessons and strengths of the past).
9. Like everything else, you still need to sell evidence-informed management (remind people that promising ideas are the result of a community of people, provide people with vivid examples of the outcomes and benefits, and all ideas/processes need champions who share the message over time).
10. The essence of leadership is teaching (helping staff learn how to build an evidence-informed perspective into the way they think and act).

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

-  Organizations need to be open to learning about themselves, work to develop new skills, learn from other agencies, and improve training resources and follow-up procedures.
-  Organizations should stress the importance of managing knowledge, which will maximize productivity and promote organizational sustainability.
-  It is important for organizations to connect knowledge sharing with organizational goals, build upon existing networks, and use influential peers to increase knowledge sharing.