

Applying evaluation-specific
methodology to a specific case:



Assessing organizational learning capacity

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Overview

- Evaluation as a way of meeting two types of need:
 - Process needs (allowing reflection and learning)
 - Content needs (providing useful information)
- Organizational learning capacity:
 - Why is it important?
 - What does it look like? The 'learning culture'
- Assessing organizational learning capacity
 1. Identify elements of organizational learning culture
 2. Determine their relative importance
 3. Set standards (how good is good?)
 4. Condense into 'snapshot' profile
- Further uses of the tool – and final comments

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Using Evaluation to Reflect & Learn

- In many evaluations, process needs (participant learning) are just as important as content needs (producing useful information for clients)

- What makes evaluation a valuable learning tool?
 - Thinking through “what really matters” – identifying the dimensions of program quality (process & outcomes)
 - Thinking about how we should ascribe value to the program’s performance on various dimensions/outcomes
 - Thinking through which of the various dimensions/outcomes are most important for the program and its recipients

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Producing Useful Information

- In some cases, clients who receive evaluation reports but do not participate in the evaluation process have:
 - Little statistical, research, or evaluation expertise
 - Little time and/or inclination to read reports
 - A vested interest in “seeing what they want to see”

- To meet their needs we often need to build in:
 - Clear interpretations of the **value of results**
 - An indication of their **relative importance**
 - **Dramatically condensed** summary information

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Designing a good assessment tool

- **Goal:** To create a diagnostic tool for assessing organizational learning capacity that:
 - Examines explicitly how well the organization is doing on the various dimensions (i.e., doesn't just describe how the organization is)
 - Indicates which dimensions are most important
 - Provides a one-page 'snapshot' of organizational learning capacity (for busy managers and staff)
 - Provides detail (for those who need it) that is transparent about where conclusions come from (i.e., the logic is easy to follow)

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Why is learning capacity important?

- What characterizes brilliant, highly effective learners?
- In general, they:
 - Have sharper perceptive 'antennae'
→ they notice things more quickly
 - Can spot patterns and make insightful inferences
 - Learn quickly from their own and others' successes and failures
- Organizations can have high or low learning capacity, just like people
- High learning capacity doesn't guarantee success, but it provides a huge advantage!



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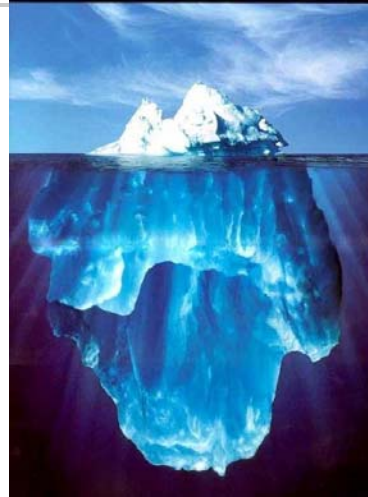


The Organizational Culture Iceberg

Formal policies,
systems, & practices

Informal practices
& symbolic actions

Beliefs, values,
& attitudes



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What makes a culture learning-enabled?

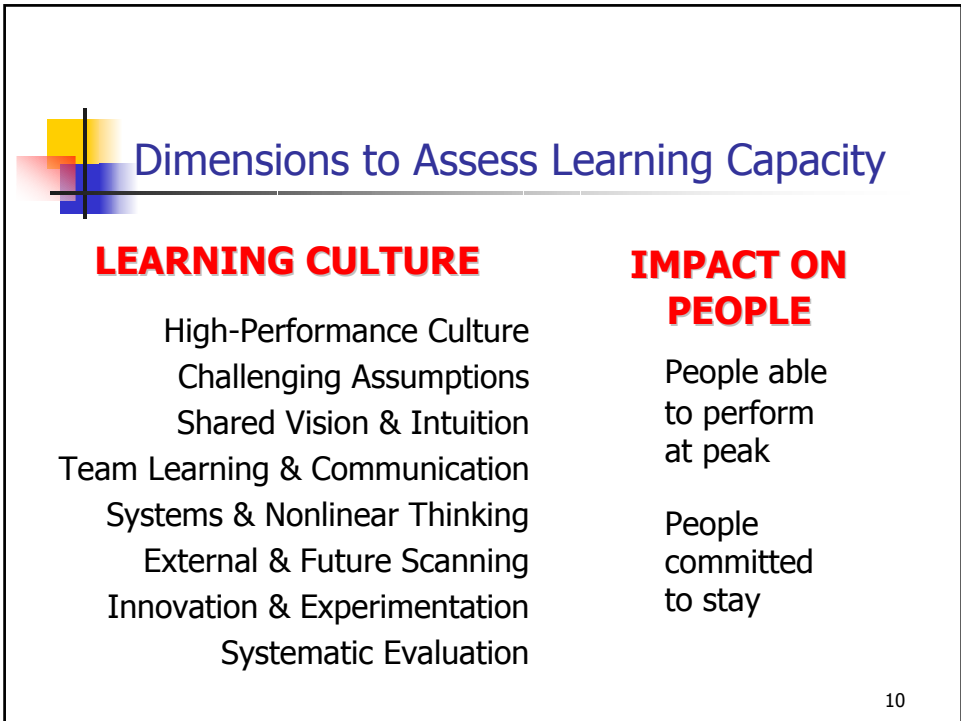
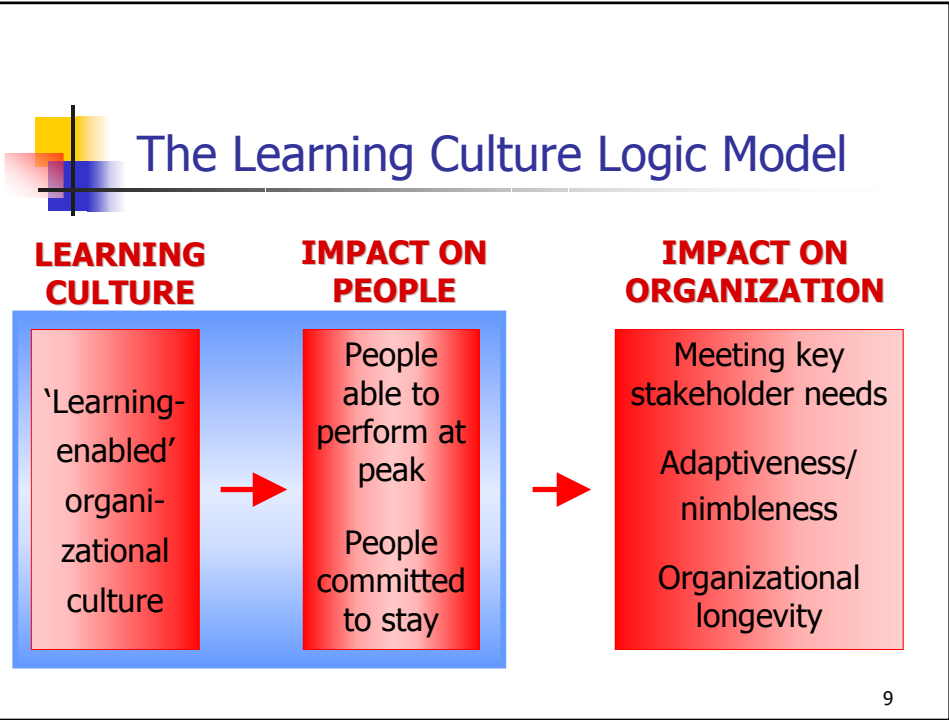
Senge's five 'disciplines'

1. High-Performance Culture
2. Challenging Assumptions
3. Shared Vision & Intuition
4. Team Learning & Communication
5. Systems & Nonlinear Thinking

Plus ...

6. External & Future Scanning
7. Innovation & Experimentation
8. Systematic Evaluation

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Importance Determination Strategies

- Use expert judgment
- Have stakeholders “vote”
 - Whose views should you poll?
 - How should you ask them? *
- Investigate for yourself:
 - **Probing interviews of key informants about needs ***
 - Evidence from the literature
 - **Causal linkages**



Importance Determination: First Step


Probing interview question: Which of the two potential impacts on people is more important for this organization?

- Being able to perform at peak?
- Commitment to stay?

Importance Determination Strategy:

Assess actual or probable impact:


- How beneficial would it be overall if performance on this criterion were really excellent?
- How detrimental would it be overall if performance on this criterion were really poor?



(a) Importance of Impacts on People

<p style="text-align: center;">LEARNING CULTURE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">High-Performance Culture Challenging Assumptions Shared Vision & Intuition Team Learning & Communication Systems & Nonlinear Thinking External & Future Scanning Innovation & Experimentation Systematic Evaluation</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">IMPACT ON PEOPLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People able to perform at peak <i>extremely important</i> ◆ People committed to stay <i>v. important</i>
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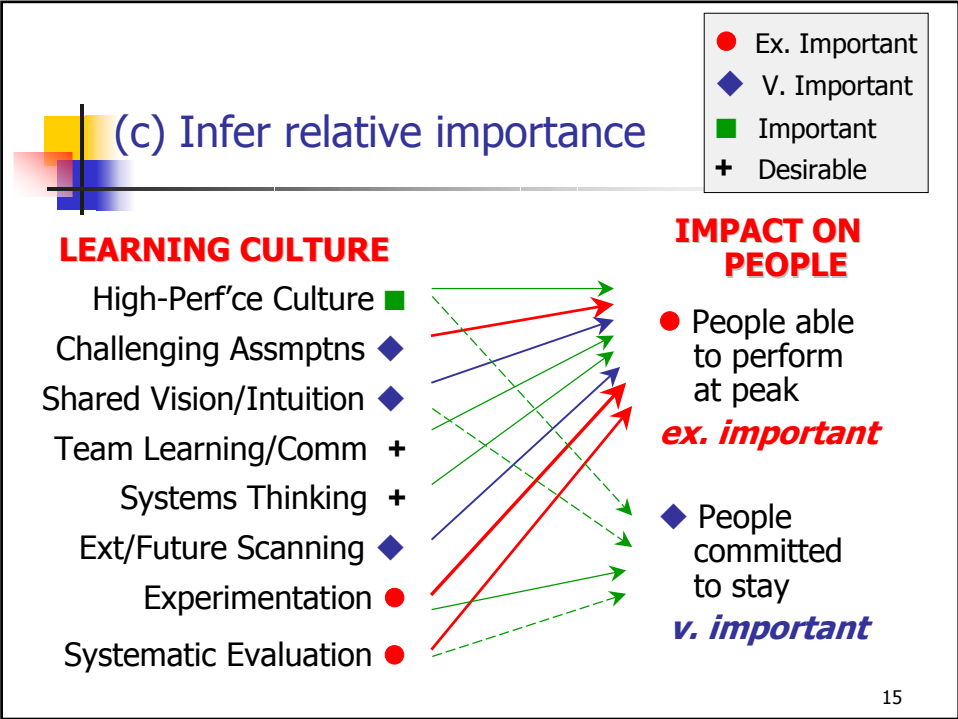


(b) Add causal links

→ V. Strong
→ Strong
→ Moderate
→ Weak

<p style="text-align: center;">LEARNING CULTURE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">High-Perf'ce Culture Challenging Assmpt'ns Shared Vision/Intuition Team Learning/Comm'n Systems Thinking Ext/Future Scanning Innov'n & Experiment'n Systematic Evaluation</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">IMPACT ON PEOPLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People able to perform at peak <i>extremely important</i> ◆ People committed to stay <i>v. important</i>
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How should we infer value/quality?

Excellent	Clear example of best practice in this dimension of org learning; no weaknesses.
Very Good	Very good or excellent performance on virtually all aspects of this dimension.
Good	Reasonably good performance on this dimension; may have slight weaknesses.
Satisfactory	Fair performance - some serious (but non-fatal) weaknesses on a few aspects.
Poor	Clear evidence of organizational practices that <u>impair</u> learning on this dimension.

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High-Performance Culture

(a.k.a. "Personal Mastery")

Definition

- Maintaining the creative tension between 'personal vision' (ambitious, meaningful goals), and the truth about current performance (DiBella & Nevis, 1998; Sathe, 2000; Senge, 1990).

Elements

- Pursuit and attainment of high, inspiring goals
- Relentless pursuit of the truth about one's own performance
- Shared understanding of the true gap between current and desired performance

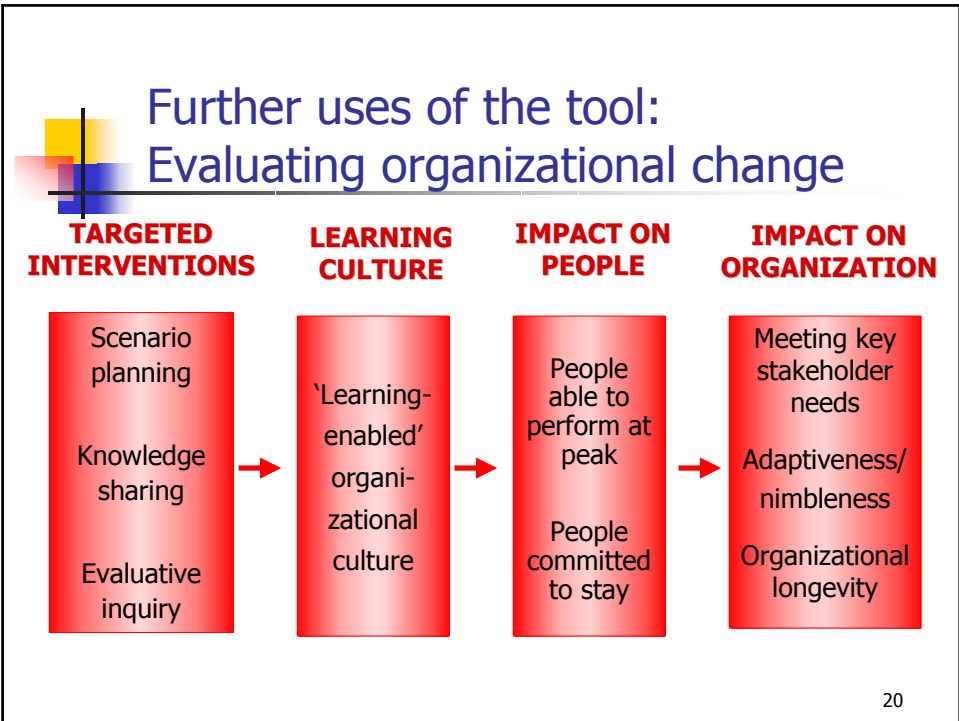
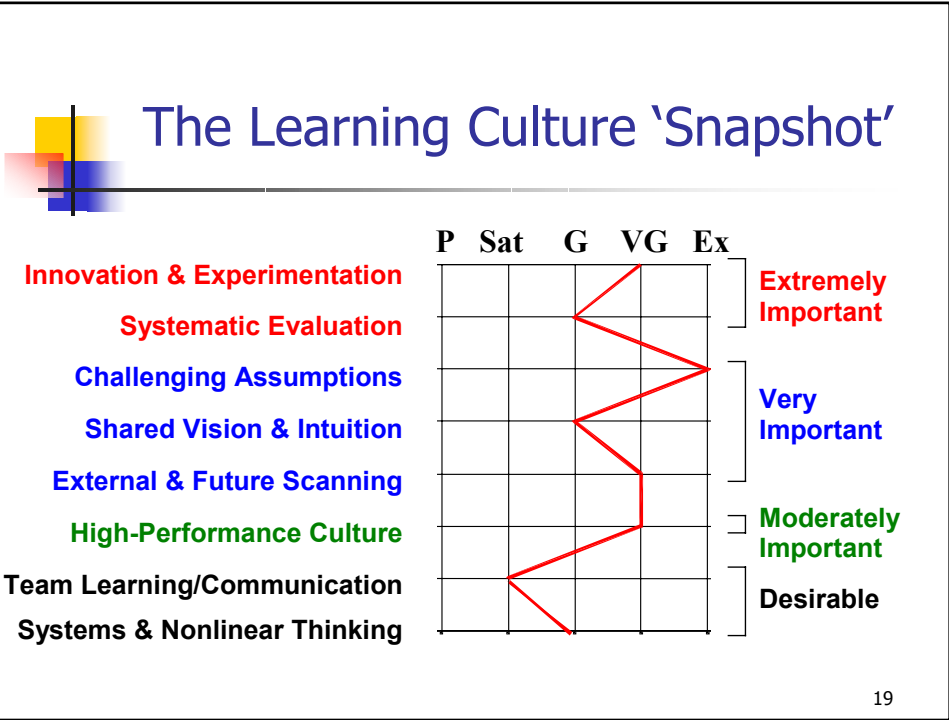
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Ex: High-Performance Culture – V.G.

- Striving for excellence – **excellent**
 - Strong consensus of high-performance culture
 - Median score on scaled items 4.5/5.0
- Seeking out criticism – **very good**
 - Owner/manager excellent role model for this, though not all employees aware how open he is to criticism
 - Median score on scaled items 3.7/5.0
- Understanding the 'performance gap' – **very good**
 - Ambiguity in innovative work prevents consensus on this
 - Median score on scaled items 4.0/5.0

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Some Closing Points

- The application of evaluation-specific methodology can be useful in both participatory and independent evaluations
- Tackling these trickier issues can be a valuable exercise in thinking through what *really* matters:
 - Which of the various dimensions/outcomes are most important for program success?
 - How should we ascribe value to the program's performance on those dimensions?

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Evaluators Seeking Feedback

- The more we can achieve good clarity, conciseness, and transparency in our evaluations ...
 - The more evaluations are open to challenge & criticism → we can use that feedback to improve the quality of our work
 - This dialogue about how we inferred our findings aids individual, group, and organizational learning – and it shows that evaluators 'walk the talk'!

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References/further information ...

Davidson, E. J. (forthcoming, early 2004). The multipurpose evaluation guidebook: The nuts and bolts of putting together a solid evaluation. Sage Publications.

Davidson, E. J. (2002). Organizational evaluation: Issues and methods. In R. L. Lowman (Ed.), Handbook of organizational consulting psychology. Jossey-Bass.

Davidson, E. J. (in press). Linking organizational learning to the bottom line: Methodological issues, challenges, and suggestions. The Psychologist-Manager Journal.

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Questions? Comments?



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Breakdown of learning culture dimensions

Senge's five 'disciplines'

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Challenging Assumptions (a.k.a. Mental Models)

Definition

- Challenging and testing deeply ingrained assumptions (Senge, 1990), theories-in-use (Argyris, 1993), and 'sacred cows' (Sathe, 2000).

Elements

- Diversity of thought truly valued
- No 'sacred cows' (undiscussables)
- Strong sense of trust (e.g., safe to criticize)

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Shared Vision & Intuition

Definition

- Sense of shared purpose (Senge, 1990), shared identity and organizational persona (de Geus, 1997).

Elements

- Shared vision (and genuine commitment to it)
- Long-term commitment to organization/sense of community and shared identity
- People exercise own good judgment and common sense in work

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Team Learning & Communication

Definition

- Team dialogue (Argyris, 1992), 'synergy' (spontaneous, coordinated action; Senge, 1990); knowledge creation/sharing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Elements

- Team synergy/intelligence
- True dialogue used; few 'defensive routines'
- Good cross-project communication

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Systems & Nonlinear Thinking

Definition

- Understanding interdependence among units (DiBella & Nevis, 1998); seeing causal loops (Senge, 1990).

Elements

- Understanding interdependence of different parts of the organization
- Looking for systemic causes of problems, and causal loops

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External & Future Scanning

Definition

- Scanning the external environment (DiBella & Nevis, 1998); creating 'memories of the future' (De Geus, 1997); embracing continuous change.

Elements

- Awareness of the external environment
- Awareness of possible changes in the future
- Change seen as a natural part of organizational life

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Innovation & Experimentation

Definition

- Constant generation of and experimentation with new ideas and methods (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

Elements

- Support for risk-taking
- Diversity of practice (variety of methods in existence)
- 'Marketplace for ideas'
- Streamlining and constant improvement

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Evaluation of Successes & Failures

Definition

- State-of-the-art, systematic evaluation of methods, products, personnel, policies, and programs (Sathe & Davidson, 2000; Scriven, 1991).

Elements

- True value focus in personnel evaluation
- Flexible use of goals
- Use of multiple perspectives
- Finger on the pulse of customer needs
- Benchmarking quality against competitors, best practice

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