3

The Cultural Facet

The Key to Productive Learning

❖   ❖   ❖

Organizational learning mechanisms described in the preceding chapter can be viewed as the nonmetaphorical, directly observable social infrastructure that enables organizations to learn. The existence of organizational learning mechanisms (OLMs), however, does not guarantee that organizational learning will occur or that learning will be productive. Organizational culture has been widely recognized as having an important effect on organizational learning and knowledge management (Ford et al., 2000; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; Schein, 1996; Tan & Heracleous, 2001). As Davenport and associates (1998) put it, "If the cultural soil isn't fertile for a knowledge project, no amount of technology, knowledge content, or good project management practice will make the effort successful" (p. 53).

Demystifying organizational learning requires clearly defining the "cultural soil" conducive to productive learning. In this chapter, we discuss five behavioral norms that we believe constitute such a culture: inquiry, transparency, integrity, issue orientation, and accountability. These values are rarely reflective of the dominant cultures of most organizations, raising the question of how learning is possible at all (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996; Schein, 1996). Therefore, before discussing the norms of a learning culture, we will address this question by clarifying our approach to organizational culture.

❖   CULTURAL ISLANDS OF LEARNING

Debate over the definition of *culture* has raged for several academic generations among sociologists and anthropologists (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). The management literature, however, has generally used the definition offered by Schein (1985, p. 9), who summarized culture as a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Culture defined in this functional way is created by groups and manifests itself at three levels: deep tacit assumptions, values that often reflect a group ideal, and the products and behaviors that represent complex compromises between values and demands of the situation (Schein, 1996).

The literature on the relationship between organizational culture and organizational learning has largely focused on the ways in which organizational culture inhibits learning (e.g., De Long & Fahey, 2000; Ford et al., 2000; Schein 1996; Tan & Heracleous, 2001). Tan and Hercaleous (2001), for example, described organizational culture as a "highly conservative, self-legitimizing force that is inherently oppositional to double-loop learning" (p. 364). Schein (1996) argued that organizations are dominated by "executive" and "engineering" cultures that inhibit, or even punish, the learning-oriented tendencies of the "operational" culture. De Long and Fahey (2000) studied over 50 companies and concluded that "organizational culture is widely held to be the major barrier to creating and leveraging knowledge assets" (p. 113).

These studies all advise managers to analyze their organization's culture and try to fit it to the demands of organizational learning. However, changing organizational culture is a complex, difficult, and long-term process with only limited chances for success (Pettigrew, 1987). McDermott and O'Dell (2001) took the opposite approach, suggesting that organizations fit knowledge-sharing methods to the existing culture.

In the companies they studied, however, fit appeared to evolve naturally, so it is not clear what managers can do to make it happen. In fact, none of the studies mentioned in this chapter provides a method for achieving fit. Rather they offer sensible but abstract advice such as rewarding information sharing and encouraging open communication. Thus, the idea of fit, which appears to make good sense, also contributes to mystification.

An alternative approach defines *culture* as a "repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed" (Swidler, 1986, p. 284). This approach sees organizational culture in more complex and dynamic terms than as a relatively fixed overarching set of values that shapes individual behavior. Rather, the values and norms of individuals and groups may be shaped by many cultures to which they have been exposed. As a consequence, people and groups can draw on different parts of their cultural repertoires to solve different kinds of problems (Friedman & Berthoin-Antal, 2004; Swidler, 1986).

This approach to culture helps explain how OLMs develop learning-oriented norms and values that are not necessarily characteristic of the organization as a whole (Redding & Catalanello, 1994). In other words, effective OLMs are "cultural islands of learning" within a "sea" of organizational culture and subcultures. Postflight reviews in the Israeli Air Force (see Chapter 12) provide an excellent example of a cultural island of learning. The deeply held values and norms that guide the behavior of pilots in these review processes are not characteristic of the Air Force or the Israel Defense Forces as a whole. Nonetheless, this OLM functions very effectively and has contributed enormously to knowledge creation and dissemination.

In order to be effective, an OLM must develop a cultural repertoire that facilitates learning in the context of a particular set of demands, problems, members, and constraints. The key, then, to demystifying organizational learning is to specify the features of this cultural repertoire. Given our definition of productive learning (see Chapter 1), the repertoire needs to include cultural norms that generate valid knowledge and lead people to act on this knowledge. In the multi-facet model, we suggest the following norms:

- *Inquiry*—persisting in investigation and suspending judgment until full understanding is achieved
- *Issue orientation*—sharply focusing learning on a specific issue or problem and considering the relevance of information regardless of the social standing or rank of the person giving or receiving this information
- *Transparency*—exposing one's thoughts and actions to the scrutiny of others

- *Integrity*—admitting errors in judgment or action when shown compelling evidence to that effect, even at the risk of incurring losses as a consequence
- *Accountability*—taking responsibility for learning and for the implementation of lessons learned

In order to make each of these cultural norms clearer and more easily understood, we will illustrate each one, using excerpts from discussions that took place in actual OLMs.

❖   THE NORMS OF A LEARNING CULTURE

The OLMs discussed in this chapter operate in Israeli high schools that serve a student population defined as "at risk." These schools are characterized by a high degree of academic failure as well as extreme social and behavioral problems (Friedman, 1997; Friedman, Razer, & Sykes, 2004). The OLMs, or "workshops," meet on a biweekly basis as part of a long-term intervention process intended to help the schools serve this population more effectively. They are off-line/internal agent OLMs that include the principal, the school counselor, a select group of teachers, and an outside facilitator. The goal of the workshops is to produce more effective action strategies for dealing with very difficult practice problems.

During these meetings, members orally present "cases," describing a problem or question that arose in their practice. With the help of the facilitator, group members analyze these cases and develop new strategies of action, which are then tested out in practice. The outcomes of these new action strategies are then reflected on in subsequent meetings. In this section, we will first define the cultural norms and then illustrate them with a vignette from the school workshops.

Inquiry

Inquiry reflects a determination to persist in investigation and to suspend judgment until full understanding is achieved. Davenport and associates (1998) include inquiry as an element of a "knowledge friendly culture" in which "people have a positive orientation to knowledge—employees are bright, intellectually curious, willing and free to explore, and executives who encourage their knowledge creation and use" (p. 52). Dewey (1938) provided an operational definition of inquiry as the "controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (p. 108). Put more simply, the process of

inquiry is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle without a picture on the cover of the box to guide us. The norm of inquiry reflects a determination to persist until the pieces of the puzzle fit together and a new, more coherent understanding of the situation is achieved.

Inquiry is illustrated in the following vignette in which the teachers were discussing the problem of students who are present in school but do not show up for class. One of the teachers insisted that her colleagues find the students and round them up. Another teacher rejected this suggestion on the grounds that it would be making a fool of himself. Rather, he insisted that "there has to be law and order around here" and that "students need to know to go to class as soon as the bell rings." The facilitator then suggested that the problem was not just a lack of law and order but that enforcing the rules is a demeaning experience.

The OLM Discussion	*Commentary*
Facilitator: Let's take a look at what happens in the schoolyard when you try to get the students to come to class. **Teacher B:** What happens? I call him and he shouts back at me: "Hey, who are you?"	*The facilitator initiates an inquiry process to help the group get a better understanding of the problem and what prevents the teachers from solving it. She begins by trying to get a more detailed picture of the problem situation.*
Facilitator: Why is that demeaning to you? **Teacher C:** When I tell the student to come into class, I want him to come into class and not to play games with me.	*The facilitator questions the teacher's emotional reaction, raising doubts about what seems "obvious."*
Facilitator: That's clear, but it's still not clear why you feel demeaned when the student says that to you. **Teacher B:** Because he's not "giving me the time of day!" He's undermining my authority. He has absolutely no respect and no ability to follow rules. . . .	*The facilitator persists in "questioning the obvious." She is trying to get at the reasoning underlying the teacher's reaction.*
Facilitator: Can you tell me something about this child? **Teacher C:** (Describes the student)	*The facilitator generates more information about the problem situation.*
Facilitator: You're telling me about a student with a horrendous background, a child who really needs you. If he were able to follow rules, he probably wouldn't be your student.	*The facilitator organizes the information and creates a new interpretation of the problem situation.*

Inquiry was called for in this situation because none of the participants in this OLM knew how to get the students into class. By insisting that everyone round up the students, the first teacher asked her colleagues to do something they really did not know how to do. By insisting that the students need to know how to follow rules, the second teacher advocated a solution that simply could not be implemented. Rather than argue over two solutions that were not working, the facilitator initiated an inquiry process that might lead to a new understanding of the problem situation itself.

Inquiry is clearly necessary when organizational members do not fully understand a situation, but it may be equally important when people think they understand a situation all too well. As illustrated in this vignette, inquiry often involves questioning the obvious. It constitutes an effort not to accept things at face value and not to jump to conclusions. Genuine inquiry can only take place if there is some degree of doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity, or confusion. It requires *not* knowing so as to open the way for new ways of perceiving a situation and for the formation of new ideas (Friedman & Rothman, 2001). Nevertheless, one of the challenges of inquiry is creating doubt and suspending judgment, which can be quite difficult, as will be seen in our discussion of the psychological facet (see Chapter 4).

One of the most difficult challenges in generating inquiry is framing a question that is truly puzzling to people so that they can learn something new. When organizational members tell us what they have "learned" from a particular experience, one of the questions we ask them is "Didn't you know that already?" Quite frequently the answer is "Well, yes, we knew that!" In other words, when people say they have learned something, they often mean that their experience has simply confirmed what they already know.

As illustrated in this vignette, which represents only a fragment of the entire discussion in the OLM, inquiry does not necessarily end with a concrete solution. At the very least, however, it fosters productive learning by increasing the likelihood that members of an OLM will arrive at a more complete, more accurate, and less distorted perception of the reality of a situation. In other words, it generates valid information on which to base choices about what should be done. In addition, it provides a better basis for learning from experience. Finally, by generating fuller and more nuanced views of a situation, inquiry may also lead to the discovery of new and more fruitful options for action. When people are feeling stuck, inquiry may actually be the most effective way of getting moving again.

Issue Orientation

The norm of *issue orientation* carries two different but interconnected meanings. The first meaning relates to the importance of focusing the learning on a specific issue or problem. Issue orientation is essential for organizational learning because productive learning is not a skill or activity that is carried out for its own sake. Rather it always operates on some specific organizational task or problem. As Seymour Papert (1980) states, "You can't think seriously about thinking without thinking about something" (p. 42). The importance of issue orientation is implicit in McDermott and O'Dell's (2001) finding that best practice companies regard sharing knowledge as a practical way to solve business problems and that knowledge management tools and initiatives need to be tied to a clear business purpose in order to take hold.

The following vignette illustrates issue orientation:

The OLM Discussion	*Commentary*
Teacher A: I want to say that I am very disappointed and angry. Yesterday a student in my class threw a chair and nothing was done about him. I expect the administration to get tougher and to punish that kind of behavior.	*Teacher A identifies an incident that occurred in her class.* *Teacher A blames the problem on the administration's weakness and expresses her negative feelings.*
Teacher B: I think that the Ministry of Education doesn't give us the "teeth" to handle these situations. The childrens' rights laws really hurt us. The most we can do is suspend a child for three days. . . . We don't have any power over these kids. . . . These new laws have taken away our authority.	*Teacher B blames the problem on the Ministry of Education and on legal constraint to their ability to punish students.*
Facilitator: You may really feel that you don't have enough power, but it's not clear to me how that is connected to the childrens' rights laws. **Teacher B:** If it weren't for laws that limit our power, then we would have more.	*The facilitator acknowledges the problem and frames it as a lack of power. Her rhetorical question casts doubt on the claim that the law is the cause of the problem.*
Facilitator: Let's not get into the issue of the law since there is no way we can repeal it. But is there a way you can give yourselves more power?	*The facilitator shifts the focus from blame to the problematic issue itself—the teachers' lack of power. She frames the problem in a way*

(Continued)

(Continued)

The OLM Discussion	Commentary
Teacher C: How?	*that emphasizes the teachers' responsibility for solving the problem.*
Facilitator: That's the question. What are your sources of power? Is it only possible to be strong if you are allowed to give strong punishments?	*The facilitator now engages in inquiry.*

One of the most commonly cited barriers to learning is a "blame and shame" culture. In this vignette, the discussion began with the teachers blaming the administration, the ministry, and the laws. If the discussion had continued in that vein, there would have been little chance of generating any productive learning. The facilitator employed issue orientation to make a shift from blaming to framing the problem itself. In this case, it meant focusing on how the teachers could strengthen their own power base without necessarily punishing the students. Issue orientation is not a strategy for avoiding disagreement and conflict but rather a way of using conflict to stimulate inquiry.

Rather than focus on individual failings or even on the nature of the relationships between people, issue orientation keeps inquiry focused on the real needs for knowledge that have to be met in order to improve organizational performance. The teachers may have been quite right about the failings of the administration and the legal constraints, but these accusations obscured the real causes of the problem and how they themselves might be able to solve it (Razer, Warschawsky, & Bar Sadeh, 2005). In this way, issue orientation sets the stage for the norm of accountability to be discussed later in this chapter (Paul, 1997).

Issue orientation also keeps OLMs from becoming support, encounter, or training groups. In their work, these teachers experienced intense emotional distress and even physical danger. The discussion among them could easily have ended with the teachers agreeing that they themselves are victims of an impossible situation. By the same token, it could have become a kind of interpersonal encounter in which teachers simply vented their feelings about the situation. However, neither emotional support nor catharsis would have generated valid information that could enable these teachers to act more effectively. Emotions were expressed and taken seriously, but inquiry went beyond expression and acceptance to look at the causes and effects of the emotions.

The first question to ask when setting up and managing an OLM ought to be "learning about *what?*" (Overmeer, 1998). When working with an organization, we help managers define the "learning questions" that will guide the creation and networking of OLMs as well as the collection of information to be used in the learning. Similarly, we work with participants of an OLM to clarify the questions that will guide their inquiry, focus their efforts, and keep them on track. Issue orientation, as expressed through clearly defined learning questions, provides the members of an OLM with criteria for monitoring their effectiveness and determining when they have completed their task.

The second meaning of issue orientation is a willingness to consider the relevance of information regardless of the social standing or rank of the person giving or receiving this information. We first recognized the importance of this value in the postflight reviews in the Israel Defense Forces Air Force (see Chapter 12). During postflight reviews, as one high-ranking officer put it, "rank does not count and everybody feels free to comment on the pilot's performance." As illustrated in Chapter 12, this statement was born out by our observations of this OLM, in which lower-ranking pilots freely questioned and criticized their superiors.

In developing the cultural facet, at first we thought of this value more generally as "egalitarianism," or the willingness to treat all organizational members as equal. On deeper analysis, however, we realized that we were not dealing with a general commitment to equality and lowering status differences. There is nothing egalitarian about the military, as well as many other organizations that engage in serious learning. In fact, rank and status are deeply held and zealously guarded values. However, postflight reviews are so effective precisely because rank and authority are not applied as criteria for determining the validity of information. In other words, issue orientation is a rejection of the logic that the boss is right just because she *is* the boss. Information is evaluated on its own terms or in terms of the trustworthiness of the source—but not in terms of status. Issue orientation maximizes the potential for generating useful information and minimizes the triggering of defenses by messages perceived as disrespectful or offensive.

Transparency

Transparency refers to the willingness to expose one's actions and thoughts to the scrutiny of others. Pagano and Pagano (2003, p. 4) have described transparency as a "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" code of conduct, which shows respect and concern both for the individual and for the common good. At the behavioral level, transparency simply

means saying what you really think and feel. Transparency is critical for productive learning to the extent that peoples' observations about the organization, its environment, and each other constitute an important source of information. Without transparency, information inputs from others would be limited or flawed.

Transparency can be illustrated through the following discussion in the school's OLM. The issue discussed was how to react when students act violently, a common occurrence in this school. The specific case was an incident in which students acted aggressively toward a teacher, who unintentionally ended up on the floor wrestling with one of them.

The OLM Discussion	*Commentary*
Principal: Above all, it's clear to me that we cannot permit a situation in which teachers are involved in physical violence with students. The students claim that the teacher pushed them first. I don't want to be a judge, but that kind of behavior is in no way acceptable. And, in fact, I told Teacher A that in these situations he has to act differently.	*The principal makes her thinking absolutely clear, giving unequivocal feedback to the teacher and all the staff.*
Teacher B: How do you want us to respond when [students attack us]? I think that in the next violent incident, I'll just disappear from the scene. Why take a risk? Teacher A, they [attacked you] and *you* get accused of being violent towards the students. That's ridiculous! (Everyone speaking at once)	*Teacher B makes her own thinking transparent. She openly shares her negative judgment of the principal's stance. She openly shares her fears and concerns. She also describes how the principal's stance will lead her to avoid problems rather than deal with them.*
Facilitator: Teacher A, what bothers you about this case? **Teacher A:** Now? Nothing. I'm finished with it.	*The facilitator attempts to focus inquiry, which requires making Teacher A's thoughts and feelings more transparent. Teacher A refrains from revealing any more information.*
Principal: Teacher A, we gave you full backing and we didn't blame you. But it's also important to look at how you might have handled it differently.	*The principal attempts to establish norms of transparency and accountability.*
Teacher A: I understand what the other possibilities were. You've already told me. I should have ignored the particular incident and then spoken with the student later.	*Teacher A still refrains from making his deeper thoughts and feelings about this situation transparent.*

Teacher C: It happens all the time. They're stronger than we are. Even in much simpler cases, such as when a student walks out in the middle of a lesson. I let him go. What am I going to do, fight with him? I don't have the strength for that!	*Teacher C reveals her way of dealing with this kind of situation, which is also avoidance. She also reveals her feelings of weakness relative to the students.*
Facilitator: Then what happens?	*The facilitator drives the inquiry deeper.*
Teacher C: Everyone sees what happens, that there is lack of limits, and then a student lets himself [act violently with] a teacher. But it doesn't begin there. It begins with the little things that people don't do.	*Teacher C continues her line of thinking and admits to the negative consequences of her avoidance strategy.*
Principal: Yes, I really think that we don't really know how to set limits.	*The principal is open about the inability of the school staff to set limits.*

Teacher A exhibited transparency by presenting his case to the group and opening himself to inquiry from others. However, he was a newcomer to the school and to this OLM. He believed that it was sufficient to simply admit his mistake and to say that he learned his lesson. He saw no reason to go any further with the case. However, this attitude ran counter to the group's norms of transparency and accountability (discussed later).

Both the principal and Teacher C were inducting Teacher A into the norms necessary for organizational learning. The principal modeled transparency in a number of ways. First, she made her judgments and expectations of the teachers absolutely clear. At the same time, she was willing to openly admit that she, and the school staff in general, did not know how to set limits. She also insisted to Teacher A that simply admitting a mistake was not enough. Rather he needed to use this incident as a learning opportunity—for himself and for the other teachers as well. When Teacher A was unable to do this, Teacher C modeled transparency. She openly shared her difficulties in handling a similar situation, which helped focus the inquiry and keep it moving.

Transparency is challenging because it requires a relatively high degree of self-awareness and the courage to share information that could upset others or reflect badly on oneself. Information and knowledge are typically considered to be sources of organizational power to be carefully hoarded. Giving away information is often seen as working against

one's own self-interest, especially if it is liable to upset others or make one look bad. Transparency requires more than openness to sharing. As Argyris and Schön (1974) illustrated, much of human behavior is almost automatic. People may be largely unaware of the thoughts and feelings driving their actions. One of the goals of inquiry is to interrupt these automatic processes and generate reflection, enabling underlying reasoning and emotions to come into consciousness and be openly discussed.

One of the problems with transparency is that it is often associated with an unrestrained "let-it-all-hang-out" or "dumping" kind of behavior. This approach to transparency was greatly encouraged by the "T-group" and "encounter group" movements that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s and which still linger in organizations today. Giving free reign to one's thoughts and feelings was often cathartic but rarely led to any significant learning or lasting change. In our work, we constantly encounter managers who refrain from transparency, and inhibit learning, because they rightfully fear what might happen if they actually said everything they think.

Transparency, however, is not a bipolar, either-or choice between withholding information or dumping one's thoughts and feelings onto someone else. In being transparent, people need to make judgments about what is relevant and necessary for *learning* and what is superfluous or gratuitously harmful. In this regard, transparency is bounded somewhat by issue orientation. Furthermore, the degree to which people reveal their actions and thoughts to the scrutiny of others depends largely on the psychological climate of an OLM (see Chapter 4).

The norm of transparency in an OLM does not develop overnight but rather emerges as group members gradually open themselves up and see what happens as a result. In order to facilitate this process, managers should first let OLM members know that they control the information they share. Rather than begin with declarations about the importance of openness and information sharing, managers can encourage OLM participants to consciously consider and choose the degree of transparency appropriate for any given situation. At the same time, managers should look for opportunities to positively reinforce transparent behaviors and to moderate reactions that work against them.

Integrity

Integrity refers to conscious, self-critical effort aimed at determining which interpretations of a situation make the most sense given the information at hand and the implications for action. In particular, it means admitting errors in judgment or action when shown compelling

evidence to that effect, even if there is a risk of incurring some costs as a consequence. The norm of integrity comes into play when members of an OLM find themselves in disagreement in the learning process. Disagreements may involve the existence of a problem, the definition of the problem situation, its causes, the proper actions to be taken, or the evaluation of actions that have already been taken.

Integrity is often mentioned in discussions of leadership and organizational theory, but it is not clearly defined and understood (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002). Generally, it refers to an active commitment to a set of moral principles and values (e.g., Becker, 1998) or to consistently truthful and ethical behavior (e.g., Craig & Gustavson, 1998). Our finely tuned definition of integrity focuses not on the personal attributes of individuals but on the ways in which they deal with ideas and opinions that differ from their own. As a cultural norm in an OLM, integrity means that people not only remain open to changing their minds but actually seek information and feedback that might lead them to see things differently.

The following vignette illustrates the norm of integrity in an OLM. The learning in this particular case focused on an incident in which a student, who had been suspended for 4 days, suddenly burst into the teachers' room and began cursing the school. The members of the OLM engaged in a process of inquiry into this incident and what might be learned form it. The facilitator suggested that they first get a more comprehensive picture of the incident and the student himself, who was known for regularly skipping school for days at a time. At that point the following interchange ensued:

The OLM Discussion	Commentary
Facilitator: It appears that this incident was only a small part of the story. . . . This kind is hardly in school at all. . . . Does anyone know why he doesn't show up? (Long silence)	*The facilitator inquires in order to get a fuller understanding of what is going on with this student.*
Teacher C: What kid of question is that? He doesn't come to school because he doesn't want to come to school. Who are we? The police?	*If teachers don't know why the student doesn't show up, it implies that they are not doing their jobs sufficiently. Teacher C became defensive.*
Facilitator: You are not the police, but you have to deal with him, don't you?	*The facilitator does not respond defensively. Rather she models issue orientation, keeping the focus on the problem situation.*

(Continued)

(Continued)

The OLM Discussion	*Commentary*
(**Teacher D** gives more details about the student's behavior, with whom he hangs around, and the lack of contact with his parents.)	
Facilitator: Explain to me why you decided to suspend this kid.	*The facilitator inquires into the reasoning behind their decision.*
Teacher A: Your questions are really unpleasant—as if we're the ones who are wrong.	*Teacher A responds defensively but openly, modeling transparency.*
Teacher B: Well, it does seem rather funny to suspend a kid for not attending school.	*Teacher B exhibits integrity. She openly admits that their reasoning might not have made sense.*
Facilitator: Maybe I don't understand, which is why I am asking. What was the reasoning behind your decision to suspend him?	*The facilitator continues to inquire into the reasoning behind the decision.*
Principal: I thought it would shake him up. Suspension is a pretty drastic step and it might wake him up.	
Facilitator: Isn't that what happened? You suspended him and he woke up. His bursting into the teachers' room was a way of saying, "Don't kick me out!" You actually achieved what you wanted? Do I understand correctly?	*The facilitator provides an alternative interpretation of the student's behavior. The behavior they saw as incorrigible is now interpreted as a sign of progress.*
Teacher B: I hadn't thought about it that way, but you are right.	*Teacher B admits error, saying that the facilitator's interpretation makes sense.*

Through the facilitator's inquiry process, the participants in the OLM began to see that their decision to suspend the student did not make much sense. The norm of integrity played an important role in keeping inquiry on track despite the growing discomfort and feelings of defensiveness. Eventually the participants were able to admit that their decision to suspend this student was not a very logical way of dealing with the problem. They were also able to accept a very different interpretation of the incident that triggered this discussion. They could see that they were wrong in considering this student incorrigible, even if it was still not clear exactly how to deal with him more effectively.

Integrity is particularly important because people can exercise considerable control over the realities they construct. In our work, we have found that people can be made aware of the implicit choices that they make in selecting and interpreting information (Friedman, 2000, 2002; Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992, 1994; Friedman et al., 2004). Once people see perception as a matter of choice, at least in part, they become aware of the multiple, reasonable interpretations of any situation. They also become more open to the possibility that the interpretations of others might be more reasonable than their own.

When organizational members face a difficult situation or conflict, we encourage them to think of what they "know" not as "facts" but as "hypotheses" to be tested through action. This strategy links the values of inquiry, transparency, and integrity. Inquiry means experiencing doubt and suspending judgment in order to understand a situation more fully and accurately. Integrity means applying the same standards of doubt and uncertainty to one's own thoughts and feelings. Transparency coupled with integrity means that feedback should always be accompanied with a question mark and a willingness to change one's own judgments or perceptions on the basis of new information or more reasonable interpretations.

Integrity is critical for enabling people and groups to overcome cognitive, emotional, and social barriers to the flow of full and accurate information. However, integrity should not be interpreted as meaning that people should never become defensive or make others defensive. Some defensiveness is inevitable, and sometimes people become defensive for good reasons, as when others are distorting or mistakenly portraying their views. As this vignette illustrates, integrity reflects an appreciation of defensiveness as an opportunity for learning rather than a threat. When regarded in this way, defensiveness serves as a stimulus to inquiry rather than as something to be overcome or avoided. Integrity, coupled with inquiry and issue orientation, enables people to deal with their own defensiveness—and that of others—by eliciting information that may reveal errors or misinterpretations.

OLMs with a norm of integrity persist in learning, despite the threats involved, because the organization's members would rather risk losing face than an opportunity to learn and improve. It is manifested in the assertion of an Israeli Air Force pilot that "the first principle in debriefing yourself and others is to be able to say honestly 'here I made an error' or 'here you made an error.'" This kind of integrity involves a high degree of self-interest. Because even slight errors can prove fatal, these pilots know that their lives depend on learning

(see Chapter 6). The norm of integrity stems, at least in part, from the belief that the best "defense" is the most accurate and undistorted view of reality that can be obtained.

Accountability

Accountability is the willingness to assume responsibility for learning and for the implementation of lessons learned. Insight and understanding are necessary, but not sufficient, for productive organizational learning. Rather, members of an OLM must feel accountable for producing insights and knowledge that enable them to take new and more effective actions—and then take them.

In notes taken during our own work in a hospital (Lipshitz & Popper, 2000), we found the following quote in an interview with the head surgeon of one of its surgery wards that illustrates accountability for both learning and implementation:

> I believe that if a patient dies or fails to heal it is our [the staff's] fault. This is a healthy attitude, even if factually it may not be true. One can always rationalize that the patient was 80 years old, that his heart was weak, that his wife nagged him to death, and so on and so forth. There are an infinite number of excuses that one can find to CYA [cover your ass]. For me, this attitude is unacceptable. If the basic premise is that we are at fault, it follows that we should find out what went wrong so that next time we will avoid this error. In my opinion, that's the key to constantly learning and improving.

As this quote illustrates, there is a difference between *learning* and coming up with reasonable *explanations* based on the facts. For the head of surgery, genuine learning only occurred when insights enabled his staff to act more effectively in similar future situations.

In order to illustrate the norm of accountability in action, we return to the case of the teacher who reacted inappropriately to student violence. In that discussion, the teacher admitted that his reaction was inappropriate. However, this led one of the teachers to suggest that it was easier to turn a blind eye to the problem than deal with it. The facilitator then suggested that the principal's reaction to Teacher A might unintentionally communicate the message that it is better not to take responsibility so as to avoid making a mistake. The principal then responded:

The OLM Discussion	*Commentary*
Principal: I want to be clear. Everyone will get my backing, but I cannot promise that I won't criticize a teacher's work. I know that a teacher might get into trouble, which is why I asked Teacher A to bring the case to this group, so that he can learn how to respond differently next time. . . . I am not angry at you [Teacher A] and don't blame you, but I do want you to learn additional skills—and not just you. You are just an example. All of us need to learn again and again how to deal effectively with violence. I don't accept what Teacher A said about calling me or the school counselor next time. You can call me, but you also have to learn how to handle it yourself.	*The principal makes her thoughts and feelings transparent. The principal demands accountability from the teachers. She makes it clear that the teachers bear personal responsibility for implementing the learning.*
Teacher A: I accept that. You're right. So what could I have done so as not to get into trouble? (OLM members raised different ideas about what a teacher could do in such a situation. They also focused on the feelings that lead teachers to freeze up. In order to discover and test out more effective ways of acting, the group engaged in a series role plays.)	*Teacher A shows integrity.*

As this case illustrates, a shared norm of accountability is essential because it is easy to confuse insight and understanding with learning. Teacher A seemed to be quite aware of what he did wrong and what he should do differently next time. In fact, Teacher A's admission of error was also an implicit attempt to put responsibility for dealing with the problem onto him. The principal's response was extremely important because it expressed both a willingness to "back" the teachers and at the same time keep them personally accountable both for learning and for their performance in these difficult situations.

Even honest intentions to act differently may be insufficient for putting lessons learned into practice. One of the central concepts in the organizational learning literature, first noted by Argyris and Schön (1978),

is the gap between the "espoused theory"—what people say or intend to do—and their "theory-in-use" that is implicit in their actions. This gap is caused, at least in part, by the fact that people's behavior is largely "automatic" or highly "skilled." People can perform complex actions— from driving a car to handling a group of violent students to making decisions—with little conscious thought about what they are doing. Highly skilled behavior is extremely useful because it enables people to react quickly and effectively in a wide variety of situations. However, this very same skill can be the source of difficulty when people want to change their deeply rooted patterns of behavior. When having to react quickly and under pressure, people often fall back on old routines, even when they know they should be doing something different.

This vignette illustrates the difference between knowing what *not* to do and knowing how to act more effectively. No one had a proven method for handling this kind of situation, which is why the principal suggested that Teacher A bring the case to the OLM. Later in the discussion, the school counselor advised the teacher not to get into a "power struggle" with the student. This advice made good sense, but it did not really help Teacher A to know what to do next time. Furthermore, the teachers realized that any new action strategy would have to include a way of dealing with their fears, which could cause them run away or freeze up. Therefore, the facilitator suggested using role playing as a way of translating this general advice into specific and, it is hoped, effective actions.

Clearly, the best way for managers to foster accountability, as well as the other learning norms, is to model it. However, organizations need to formally and informally reinforce accountability. Beer and Spector (1993) pointed both to the importance of accountability and to ways of establishing it:

> Organizations must hold managers accountable for engaging in [a process] if that process is to become an on-going, institutionalized part of the organization's life. Such accountability should occur when a significant part of a manager's performance evaluation is based on ability and willingness to undertake [this process] within her or his unit and among peers and subordinates. (p. 648)

As this quote indicates, the products of learning will become embedded in culture only if managers are held accountable for implementing them on an ongoing basis. In order for this to occur, organizations need to embed the products of learning in the broader systems of management. The role of the organization in creating conditions for

accountability will be addressed more thoroughly in the chapter on the policy facet (see Chapter 5).

❖ DEMYSTIFYING CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Productive organizational learning is contingent on the existence of a learning culture because of the social nature of organizational learning. In organizational contexts, valid knowledge requires the cooperation of others to provide undistorted information and for the interpretation of this information from multiple perspectives. The five norms described previously—inquiry, transparency, integrity, issue orientation, and accountability—provide a comprehensive but parsimonious model for capturing the key features of such a culture. Although we have treated each value separately, we have also shown that they are highly interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In focusing on these five norms, we are not claiming to have discovered some ultimate truth about organizational learning. There may be other important norms that we have overlooked or ways of generating productive learning with fewer norms. However, we have been guided by a pragmatic approach aimed at cutting through the mystification unintentionally created by overarching treatments of organizational culture and by vague concepts such as "fit."

The rationale for selecting these five norms is because they support understanding (the generation of valid knowledge) and action, the two necessary ingredients for productive learning. Inquiry, transparency, issue orientation, and integrity, support understanding, whereas accountability supports both understanding and action. All these norms imply a willingness to incur costs in order to achieve productive learning. Assuming that organizational learning involves tackling nontrivial, ill-defined problems in complex and dynamic situations, understanding requires inquiry, that is, dogged, persistent investigation in spite of difficulties. Inquiry, of course, is also required from the physicist who might single-handedly solve a problem in advanced quantum mechanics. In social contexts, it requires the collaboration of others and transparency, without which input from others will necessarily be limited or flawed. Transparency is risky owing to the potential exposure of one's failures and faults. The ensuing anxiety induces defensive routines, which can block inquiry or subvert its integrity:

"When [sensitive] information . . . is made public . . . [it is] apt to make participants uncomfortable. . . . They may call for closure, rarely

in the name of being anxious, but rather in the name of getting on with the task" (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 57).

Integrity and issue orientation help people proceed with inquiry despite the threat that it involves. Integrity means that a person prefers the loss of face and other costs incurred by public exposure to the loss of an opportunity to learn and improve. Issue orientation prevents the triggering of defensive behavior by messages that are perceived as disrespectful or offensive. The benefits of issue orientation to the detection and correction of error were observed by a shop floor worker interviewed by Edmondson (1996):

> Lets' say I just did a part and got drips on it. Now, if they [those next in the production process] told me I got drips on the edge, I say "thanks"—and then I'm glad I can get these drips off. Where it used to be, when that happened, we'd just try to find something wrong that person did—we'd keep an eye out for it! It wasn't to be helpful, it was to bring them down to your level, or something like that. . . . Now we think nothing of it. We just fix it.
>
> I think that the reason we are now so open to that kind of thing is because we feel that the people who are telling us are not telling us because they want to pull us down and say we are doing a bad job but because they want us to do a good job—to do the product good—so they want to work together to make the product better. (p. 28)

Fostering an organizational culture conducive to learning is clearly much more difficult than establishing organizational learning mechanisms. Organizational members with whom we work frequently raise the follow puzzle: "We know that organizational learning will not take off without a learning culture. But how can we change the culture without organizational learning?" As Dixon (2000) has rightly noted,

> It is a kind of chicken-or-egg issue: Which comes first, the learning culture or the exchange of knowledge? Given many organizations' rather abysmal success rate at changing their culture, I would put my money on having the exchange impact the culture rather than waiting for the culture to change. (pp. 5–6)

We agree with Dixon about the improbability of creating overall cultural change as a prerequisite to organizational learning. Furthermore, we believe that the "chicken and egg" problem can be addressed by shifting the focus from the overall organizational culture to the cultural norms promoted within specific OLMs.

We have chosen to focus on behavioral norms rather than on values or underlying assumptions because behaviors are more easily observable. Another reason for focusing on behavioral norms is that they are the place to begin in changing culture and instilling values. By specifying and illustrating these norms in specific behaviors, we aim at providing a framework that can guide action. Rather than focus on the barriers to learning or on vague recommendations, these five norms provide organizations with clear targets to aim for in establishing and managing OLMs. Every OLM will manifest them in a different way and to a different degree, depending on factors such as on the nature of the learning task, the culture repertoires people bring to an OLM, and their past experience working together.

Putting these learning-oriented norms into practice also depends on the abilities and personalities of the people involved in an OLM. Some of these norms mean acquiring special skills and even a kind of artistry (Friedman & Sykes, 2001; Schön, 1987). Inquiry, for instance, involves much more than simply asking questions. Skillful inquirers see gaps, contradictions, and other openings to learning in situations that often seem quite closed to most people. Issue orientation involves skill in the process of framing and reframing problems. Transparency requires an ability to communicate one's thoughts and feelings in ways that can be clearly understood. The speed and extent to which integrity and accountability will be exercised depends on the personalities of the individuals involved.

In the foregoing vignettes, which involved the relatively early stages of an intervention process, these skills were modeled mainly by a professional facilitator. In other cases, such as the postflight reviews in the Israeli Air Force (see Chapter 10), learning-oriented norms develop naturally without outside intervention. Either way, they become embedded in the culture of effective OLMs and can be enacted by employees at all levels, as illustrated by the case of Hewlett-Packard (Chapter 11) and Chaparral Steel (Chapter 12).

Probably the best way to make learning and knowledge sharing *values* of the organization is to make sure that these behaviors actually occur and produce positive outcomes for organizational members. To the extent that participants in an OLM exhibit these behaviors, especially when it entails considerable risk and threat, learning and knowledge sharing will have been internalized as values. To the extent that OLMs are seen by organization members to be contributing to their work, the cultural norms and values are likely to be exported to the organization at large, along with the substantive knowledge.

Rather than aim at an overall transformation of organizational culture, the change strategy implied in this chapter focuses on OLMs as

"cultural islands" of organizational learning. The role of management is to make sure that values of a learning culture are promoted and supported within these frameworks. Over time, these cultural islands engage in "trade" relations—sharing and disseminating knowledge among themselves and among other units in the organization. The greater the number of effective OLMs with strong learning cultures—and the more extensive the links with the organization as a whole—the more the organization is likely to learn.