

# A Learning Organization: The Clubs of Lee County

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## Introduction

Many theorists have expressed their perspectives about learning organizations and the inherent culture of such organizations. Most of the theorists share a common cultural theme about how individuals learn, change, and grow in ways that propel their organizations forward. Forward organizational propulsion is a hallmark of a learning organization and is evidenced by a culture that facilitates people within organizations to overcome challenges and map out progressive organizational futures. Some of the experts have been so specific as to try to define the particular qualities that constitute learning organizations. From these definitions, several similar views have emerged as representative of descriptions about learning organizations:

1. Learning organizations are places "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 how to learn together" (Senge, 1990, p. 1).
2. "A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin, 1993, p. 80).
3. A learning organization "is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself" (Pedler, et al., 1991, p. 1).

In an attempt to further clarify what characterizes a learning organization, we submit that an effective learning organization possesses a unique culture that encourages renewal and growth. An effective learning organization incorporates the experiences and ideas of internal and external stakeholders and continually transforms itself so that it propels itself and its stakeholders forward in a manner that facilitates a more fruitful future than could have otherwise been possible. Using this description as a framework, one can probe into an organization's operations and culture to determine whether or not it is a learning organization. That is, one can determine the extent to which the organization transforms itself based on individual and collective experiences so that it propels itself forward in a manner that facilitates a fruitful future.

As a basis for this essay, the authors investigated a local community service organization that primarily serves urban adolescents. The purpose was to determine to what degree this organization adhered to the authors' notion of what constituted an effective learning organization. As a result, it was the authors' observation that this organization, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County in Alabama, has incorporated the theme of transformation and renewal as a thread woven throughout the organizational fabric. As a learning organization, the Clubs use this thread as a mechanism. It is a mechanism of feedback, change, and growth through the endless spiral of continuous renovation and organizational improvement in order to facilitate a fruitful future for the organization and the urban youth who are the cornerstone of the Clubs. Therefore, this paper provides a brief précis of the Girls and Boys Clubs of Greater Lee County in an effort to demonstrate that they constitute a learning organization.

This essay refers to this single organization in the plural as the “Clubs” because it has two physical locations in the urban areas of Lee County. One is the Potter-Daniel facility located in Opelika, Alabama and the other is at the Boykin Center located in Auburn, Alabama (Reed, et al., 2001, p. 4). Both locations are nestled within a portion of the Lee County community that is considered disadvantaged. Many of the community’s residents are of low socio-economic status and most of the Clubs members are children of culturally diverse minorities. Twenty percent of the Clubs’ members live in public housing and 49 percent live in single-parent families with annual incomes below \$22,000 (Boys and Girls Clubs, 2002, p. 2). The urban youth who are the essence of the Clubs endure the disadvantages of a marginalized area of the community and the Clubs are one of the few organizations that serve this particular marginalized populous. However, the Clubs make a great impact on this marginalized populous. The Clubs’ programs, “...focus on education and career development, character and leadership development, the arts, health and life skills, sports, fitness, and recreation” (Reed, et al., 2001, p. 4). As a result of the Clubs’ practical programs and their positive impact on members, as of 2002 the Clubs of Greater Lee County were serving more than 1,400 urban adolescents (Boys & Girls Club Brochure, 2002).

## **Background and Culture**

The Girls and Boys Clubs of Greater Lee County, as an organization, are chartered by the Boys and Girls (B & G) Clubs of America to provide opportunities for children. The B & G Clubs of America is a national organization that was founded in 1906 for the betterment of children and to contribute to the betterment of American society. Like the Clubs in Lee County, Alabama, the national network of B & G Clubs facilities are principally “located in communities and areas where children are the most disadvantaged, B&G Clubs have provided at-risk girls and boys with a full and fair opportunity to lead productive, meaningful lives” (Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 1995). Therefore, the altruistic manner of each B & G Club within the nationwide network of over 1,700 affiliated Clubs justifies holding each Club up as a model for service organizations within local communities; but in addition to this, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County serves as a model to all types of organizations, service or otherwise, because they have made stakeholder involvement, renewal, and growth an imperative within their organization. Furthermore, they believe in their abilities to transform children’s lives, to help children from all backgrounds develop the qualities needed to become responsible citizens and leaders. In order to fully realize their positive and lasting transformational impact on children and society, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County adhere to a culture of internal transformation and growth (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002).

Robert Evans (1996, p. 41) in his book, *The Human Side of School Change*, defines the culture of an organization as “the deeper level of based assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment.” The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County operate under a deep level belief and assumption that all children, including local urban adolescents from disadvantaged circumstances, have the ability and desire to succeed. Their deep-seated beliefs are reflected in their statement which says the mission of the Clubs is “to inspire and enable all young people, especially those from disadvantaged

circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens” (Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 2002).

Based on these beliefs, the Clubs have formed their own cultural personality that promotes appreciation and trust of people, their goals are people-benefit-oriented and community-benefit-oriented, and their approaches include rewarding risk-taking, courage, and, “...a recognition of the value of learning from mistakes” (S. Spratling, Personal communication, November 6, 2000). A reflection of their culture can be found in their leadership practices, their operational structures and processes, and their service to the stakeholders. Also, their cultural essence is present in their approach to professional development and can be sensed in the many symbols that identify the Clubs as a learning organization (Lewis, 2000).

### **Leadership Practice**

The staff and leaders at the Boys and Girls Clubs are problem solvers for urban youth and the community. Since they believe in the capacity of the children to succeed, they act on those beliefs by establishing policies, procedures, and a caring culture that cultivates young minds to change and grow and generate the inner strength and character to become leaders (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002). Having policies and procedures that foster leadership cultivation is part of the culture of a learning organization.

According to Preskill and Torres (1999, pp. 42-43), learning “organizations ‘act on a continuing basis over time, and thus, build up systems, policies, procedures, and cultures.’ When individuals inquire into a problematic situation on the organization’s behalf and retain, crystallize, or embed new practices, values, or understandings, the organization learns.” While respecting privacy issues, the Clubs’ staffs and leaders inquire into each child’s individual (sometimes problematic) situation. Most children are economically disadvantaged urban youths and most experience less than optimal family conditions. After considering each individual child’s situation, the Clubs’ staffs crystallize their convictions so that they can challenge and make a positive difference for that child—the Clubs investigate, extrapolate potential solutions to any problems encountered, and put into practice new procedures that benefit the child. For instance in 2002, the staffs, under direction of their Executive Director, assessed issues related to disruptive behaviors that were negatively impacting the Clubs’ programs. The assessment revealed that a consequence-based disciplinary system was required in order to curb disruptive behaviors and thereby enhance programs to benefit the members at large. Therefore, a new consequence-based disciplinary system was implemented and the new discipline practices have been credited with, “...a dramatic decrease in disruptive behaviors” (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002). While this is only one example, one should note that over time, a host of new practices have been built up that benefit a multitude of members—a characteristic of the Clubs’ ability to learn.

The Clubs employs an open-minded, flexible, and growth-oriented learning-leadership style, which is evident in their practices. The Clubs lead the community, by example, toward a philosophy of strength through diversity. Both the Clubs’ staffs and members reflect inclusion of a variety of races, ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs of people who merge their talents into a team. The Clubs also lead by encouraging the personal growth and life-long learning of staffs and members (S. Spratling, Personal communication, November 6, 2000).

The leadership styles exhibited at the Clubs help facilitate learning; staff members do not impose an autocratic or micromanagement atmosphere. The staffs at the Clubs cater to community needs and to the needs of the Clubs' urban adolescent members. Furthermore, the Clubs demonstrate leadership among their staffs, members, and local communities as they work toward the Clubs' mission. As staffs and members participate in daily activities, the Clubs' vision and mission are an ever-present focus. The communication of a clear and consistent vision helps translate their learning vision into achievable goals. The Clubs' programs and goals are inseparable and include, "...career development, character and leadership development, the arts, health and life skills, sports, fitness, and recreation" (Reed, et al., 2001, p. 4) as well as, "Specialization Program Initiatives" (Boys & Girls Clubs Brochure, 2002). By focusing on the well-being of its members, the Clubs are leaders of positive impact for urban youths and their communities at large (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000).

### **Structures and Processes**

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County employ a structure of, "...collaboration, communication, and cooperation" (Reed, 2000, p. 2). It is apparent from this structural description that the Clubs are a helping organization. Although the Clubs conform to a typical organizational chart with a single Executive Director at the top, the Executive Director along with each of the two subordinate Unit Directors and their staffs recognize how important it is for a bottom-up directional communications flow and a decision-making structure that empowers people at all levels. Each person within the structure, from the youth/member to the Executive Director has an important role in crafting youths' futures—"each person owns part of the process" (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16 2002).

Using the organizational chart as a structural template, the Clubs' staffs consider the individual members as a ground floor bounding with raw material that is under architectural design and construction. Staffs consider themselves as co-carpenters who collaborate, communicate, and cooperate among themselves and other craftsmen (parents, community leaders, volunteers, and in many cases the youths are also co-carpenters and architects). The Executive Director and her Unit Directors also act as co-carpenters and they collaborate, communicate, and cooperate up, down, inside, and outside of the organization's structure. Furthermore, directors consider themselves as the electricity that helps to power carpenters' saws, light the structure so all concerned can see clearly, and power the communications networks and life support functions that are critical to the growth and well being of the members (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000).

The Clubs' staffs serve as part of the electrical conduit, communications network and life support system. They are attentive to the needs of each individual member on up and they incorporate feedback mechanisms and, "...manage by walking around (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000)." They employ this structure and process to get information directly from members, members' parents, staff members, and the community so they, as a learning organization, can grow and change to meet the needs of these stakeholders (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002).

The structures at the Clubs empower individual staff members at their lowest levels to make appropriate changes and accommodate stakeholders' needs and then dialogue with others about those changes as soon as is practical—the Clubs' leaders trust the abilities of individuals on the staffs and vice versa. However, most long-term changes require input from several or all staff members in order to ensure all things are considered in a way that ensures changes are positive and have appropriately addressed the problem, not just a symptom of the problem (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000). Therefore, after individuals within the Clubs' staffs make observations, ask questions, and begin to formulate beliefs and ideas about changes that need to be made within the organization, the staff comes together for collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Furthermore, this process is formalized as part of the structures of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County (Lewis, 2000).

As part of a formalized process, individuals from the Clubs' staffs bring news, observations, and proposed changes and solutions to share and discuss with each other at weekly staff meetings. The staff meetings are held locally within each of the two units and chaired by each Unit Director. The directors from each unit also gather for an administrative staff meeting chaired by the Executive Director. At administrative staff meetings each Unit Director shares information about issues, observations, and resolutions to the challenges that each unit has or may soon face—the result is, "...collaboration, communication, and cooperation" (Reed, 2000, p. 2). Their primary objective is to impact their members in positive and substantial ways so that members, primarily urban youths, can grow and change to be better suited to contribute to their own futures and to society as a whole. Therefore, the Clubs' structures and processes are accommodated by recognition of, "...individuals and their capacity to learn as the organization's greatest resource" (Reed, 2000, p. 2).

### **Service to Stakeholders**

The Clubs exist to serve their stakeholders and the attitude of the Clubs' staffs reflects this focus. The key stakeholders include the "Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Board of Directors, Executive Director and Staff, Advocates & Sponsors, Chamber of Commerce, Volunteers, Members, Parents, [and the] Community" (Reed, 2000, p. 8). Without a doubt, the primary stakeholder served by the Clubs is the members—local urban adolescents. The Clubs' primary responsibility is to the members; however, members have to fulfill their responsibilities too. Member youths, "...must be attentive, responsive to authority, and act responsibly" (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000). Furthermore, members are expected to be involved in the Clubs' programs and possess a sense of seriousness and not be opposed to having fun; "The members are expected to be receptive to appropriate guidance and to grow and learn" (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000).

The Executive Director ensures that the Clubs meet member youths' expectations and needs by administering the Clubs as a learning organization. The Clubs grow as a learning organization by requesting feedback from stakeholders and implementing beneficial changes. Under the Executive Director's leadership, the Clubs periodically send out surveys and ask questions about stakeholders' needs. The result of this feedback can be seen in the Clubs hours of operation, programs, practices, and processes. All these are implemented in a way to best serve urban youth members and other stakeholders. The Clubs' staff members work hard to provide the

highest quality programs available to serve all concerned (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002).

### **Professional Development**

According to the Executive Director (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002), The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County continually work toward the development of their leaders and staff members. Professional development is taken so seriously that the Clubs close to the public one week out of every six-month period in order to provide a Professional Development Week for their staffs. Additionally, the Executive Director orchestrates quarterly workshops in order to address topics that require further or continued training for the staffs. On an individual level, the Executive Director and/or each Unit Director has personal contact with each teacher and volunteer, assessing individual strengths and weaknesses; and, in doing so, she and the Unit Directors adapt training to suit the staffs' needs. Each staff member is encouraged to speak out and identify training needs so that the organization can accommodate them. Also, areas for growth come to light and are addressed each week at their regularly scheduled administrative and unit staff meetings. These meetings are designed to foster clear communication as well as to help the staffs grow (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002). This is further evidence that the Clubs are a learning organization. These staff meetings are crucial for the learning of individuals and the organization. In fact, according to Preskill and Torres (1999, p. 52), learning organizations have its "members come together to engage in the learning process of (a) Dialogue, (b) Reflection, (c) Asking Questions, and (d) Clarifying Values, Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge." These actions are the focus of the Clubs' staff meetings but also occur on a daily basis at the Clubs (W. Lewis, Personal communication, July 16, 2002).

### **Organizational Symbols**

As noted by Bowman and Deal (1993, pp. 2-3), an individual organization's culture is reflected within the four frames: political, structural, human resources, and symbolic. The first three of these frames are evident throughout the leadership practices, operational structures and processes as well as the service to the stakeholders provided by the Clubs. However, another component to the Boys and Girls Clubs is their symbols. Although Henderson and Hawthorne (2000, p. 158) note that "School culture is the invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions . . ." Nothing could be farther from the truth for the Boys and Girls Clubs—their culture is readily apparent through the many symbols of the Clubs. The children, staff, and other stakeholders enjoy visits from community leaders who were themselves positively impacted by the Clubs and serve as role model symbols of what each member is capable of becoming (S. Spratling, Personal communication, November 6, 2000). Members at the Clubs often earn recognition awards as symbols of their leadership, outstanding behavior, and performance. Also, members and other stakeholders of the Clubs rally around national symbols. The national office of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America disseminates pamphlets and brochures to the public and to each club and the local communities—each item prominently displays the national club symbol of clasped hands. Furthermore, this clasped-hand philosophy is played out through the cooperation and collaboration accomplished between the national office and the local clubs, among local clubs, within each local club's staff and members, and between local clubs and their local

communities—the trust, concern, love, help, and support reveals the spirit of the symbol and philosophy of the clasped hands.

## **Analysis and Conclusions**

One reason for the Clubs' success and classification as a learning organization is that they continually strive to find better ways to serve their stakeholders. The primary stakeholder served by the Clubs of Greater Lee County is the local urban adolescents who make up the Clubs' principal membership. The Clubs' focus is on helping urban youths to develop the qualities needed to become responsible citizens and leaders. The fact that the Lee County Clubs have over 1,400 members enrolled is a testament to the need for their presence within their small but urban and disadvantaged community.

The Clubs' staffs are representative of the community they serve. Like the youths they serve, staff members reflect an inclusion of a variety of races, ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs. Furthermore, many of the staff members were youth members of the Clubs themselves. Therefore, member youths see staff members as positive examples and role models. According to one administrator, "Members identify with the Clubs' staffs" (E. Slaughter, Personal communication, October 9, 2000).

Another way in which the Clubs prove themselves as a successful learning organization is by perpetuating an attitude of being problem solvers for urban youths and the community. To best serve the youths, the Clubs, while respecting privacy issues, get involved with each child as an individual and tailor their programs to fit individual needs. The Clubs learn and grow, they investigate, extrapolate potential solutions to any problems encountered, and put into practice new procedures that benefit the child and the community,

We conclude that the Clubs are a learning organization. Like any other learning organization, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Lee County have formed an organization with its own features and cultures. The Clubs developed their character through trials and extreme difficulties, identification of problems and resulting decisions about solutions that adhere to a bottom-up approach, and a sincere trust in the abilities of individuals to learn and share and help the organization change. All the while, they have kept examining and practicing innovative techniques in a way that helped transform themselves and their members into a crucial part of the local community. Therefore, the Clubs exemplify the components of learning organizations. As stated by Henderson & Hawthorne (2000), the components of a learning organization are as follows:

1. Leadership that fosters continuous expansion of the ability of the participants to shape their future
2. The use of creative tension (i.e., the gap between the vision of the organization and its current mode of operating) as the stimulus for growth
3. People with the ability to be "system thinkers"—that is, see interrelationships among various aspects of the organization (such as curriculum, supervision, professional development, assessment, school climate) (p.162).

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Lee County are outstanding examples of a learning organization. Their culture is infused with an atmosphere that promotes a flow of information up, down, and laterally across the organizational structure. This flexible communication process of free-flowing feedback is embraced as a basis for change and growth. It all comes back to leadership. The Clubs' open-minded, flexible, and growth-oriented leadership styles are reflected in structures and processes that maximize the benefits to stakeholders, particularly the urban youth members.

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