Organizational Learning and Anxiety

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In organizational and management literature, debates take place concerning what would be the best way for organizations to prepare for the future. The debate concentrates on two positions, one of which emphasizes the necessity of sound strategic planning, whereas the other position firmly underlines the necessity of learning on both the individual and organizational level in order to maintain and enlarge competitive advantage.
For several reasons, both positive formal and informal learning in organizational settings do not always have the desired impact. These reasons can be located on both sides of the agency – affordance dichotomy. On the agency side, those who learn can experience all kinds of anxieties and fears because of their own mind set. On the affordance side, organizational characteristics (including leadership and colleague attitudes and behavior) may evoke anxieties and fears, in the worst case, a culture of fear.

One important the point of departure is, that one cannot not learn. Learning takes always place, not only for better, but also for worse, and probably most of the time accidental (as in the informal curriculum of the organization). People in organizations all have their own learning history, either positive or negative, but mostly of the mixed kind, keeping them vigilant towards all kinds of attempts to invite them to learn.
From an existential point of view, anxiety is part of the human condition. Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, suggests that people are forced to take more or less important decision throughout the day, without having access to relevant information nor with appropriate ideas about future outcomes and impact of these decisions. In this respect, anxiety is the ever sounding fundamental key-note in all human thinking, feeling, and acting. On the very moment, anxiety has a more delineated object, it turns into one or more specific fears, with attempts to cope with fear as a new source of fear. This makes anxiety in learning processes to a multi-headed monster, hard to fight, if only, because a small amount of fear may even be helpful in learning.

In this contribution, after having introduced the theme (1), the variety of fears is identified and explored, starting with a brief description of the human condition from an existential perspective (2). Next, the diverse elements of learning processes and learning situations are considered (learning contents, learning conditions including learning setting, learning companions, learning atmosphere, and working place), distinguished according to formal and informal learning, as far as necessary, with special attention anxiety evoked by giving inappropriate feedback and by copings strategies such as compliance (3). The question then is, what keeps people still motivated to be involved in processes of organizational learning, despite the vast and pervasive anxiety that seems to be inherent to learning. Most likely, elements of hope as described by Joseph Pieper, Gabriel Marcel, Victor Frankl, Paul Tillich, Ernst Bloch, and Otto Bollnow are strong drivers in organizational learning processes (4). In conclusion, suggestions for improvement of organizational learning are proposed, with special attention for leadership as a pivotal element in organizational learning, both positive and negative. More in particular, those who guide learning, should be aware of the anxiety provoking character of all learning and act accordingly to it by taking care of a safe climate for learning based on concepts such as the holding environment (Winnicott) and containment (Bion) and offering corrective emotional experiences (French and Alexander) to those in need of it (5).

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