

# How Can Organizations Learn Faster? The Challenge of Entering the Green Room

Edgar H. Schein

**I**F YOU PUT A DOG IN A GREEN ROOM AND GIVE IT ELECTRIC SHOCKS, IT LEARNS TO STEER CLEAR OF THAT ROOM. BUT WHAT IF THE GREEN ROOM IS ORGANIZATIONAL change, and people are so afraid of past experiences with it that they won't try anything new? In this article, Schein unravels the key psychological elements that inhibit or promote change. His primary goal is to help organizations not only to change, but to change faster, in order to keep up with the rapidly shifting environment. He begins with abstract concepts of learning and then outlines a change management procedure that leaders can use to help their organizations change and, ultimately, to develop perpetually learning organizations. This paper is based on an invited address to the World Economic Forum, 6 February 1992, Davos, Switzerland. ∞

*Edgar H. Schein is professor of management at the MIT Sloan School of Management.*

**O**nly a few years ago we were saying that the "management of change" is the biggest challenge organizational leaders face. Today we hear that the problem is no longer the management of change but the management of "surprise," and we academics are asked more and more frequently to explain not just how organizations can make major transformations but how organizations can do these activities faster and faster.<sup>1</sup> The world is changing quickly. In order to survive and grow, organizations must learn to adapt faster and faster or be weeded out in the economic evolutionary process.

In this paper I will analyze the learning process to show how learning at the organizational level can be speeded up. I will start with some abstract concepts but will close with some practical suggestions. I am struck by how little we really know about the dynamics of organizations and social systems, and how little we

know about the learning process. A friend and colleague, Donald Michael, has observed that one of the most difficult problems of our age is that leaders, and perhaps academics as well, cannot readily admit that things are out of control and that we do not know what to do.<sup>2</sup> We have too much information, limited cognitive abilities to think in systemic terms, and an unwillingness to violate the cultural norms that leaders must always appear to be in control and to have solutions for all our problems. We are afraid that if we admit our confusion, we will make our followers and students anxious and disillusioned. We know we must learn how to learn, but we are afraid to admit it.

Yet current circumstances tell us that learning is no longer a choice but a necessity and that the most urgent priority is learning how to learn — and learning faster. If we are to do this, we must speak about several things that are not often discussed among leaders and man-

agers, particularly, the role of anxiety in learning and the role of groups and communities in helping us cope with this anxiety and, thus, facilitating learning.

### Three Types of Learning

We must first understand that learning is not a unitary concept; there are at least three distinctly different kinds of learning that require different time horizons and that may apply to different stages of an organizational change process: (1) knowledge acquisition and insight, (2) habit and skill learning, and (3) emotional conditioning and learned anxiety.

#### Knowledge Acquisition and Insight

Our commonest view of learning is the acquisition of information to build our knowledge base. We often think of this kind of learning as a slow and tedious process, such as reading for information or memorizing. But we also know that with some kinds of cognitive learning — solving a crossword puzzle, figuring out a “brain teaser,” or doing a mathematics problem — the answer can suddenly pop into our head after hours of not seeing it, and once we have it we can make whatever further cognitive change is required quite rapidly. Insight gives us a new level of understanding and a new direction.

Insight is often difficult to achieve, and when we cannot solve a problem because it is too complex, we become frustrated and anxious. I will call this Anxiety 1, the feeling that is associated with an inability or unwillingness to learn something new because it appears too difficult or disruptive. To avoid Anxiety 1, we deny the problem, or simplify it even if that means distorting the problem, or project the problem onto someone else, or in various other defensive ways, manage not to learn.

Leaders sometimes attempt to overcome Anxiety 1 and speed up insight learning by articulating a vivid new vision and communicating it widely.<sup>3</sup> If they are successful, the organization can sometimes change direction quickly and dramatically. But there are at least two reasons why leadership vision is unlikely to produce such a result. Our organizational culture, which can be thought of as the accumulation of prior learning based on prior success, typically limits and biases our capacity to perceive and understand a new vision.<sup>4</sup> And sometimes our cognitive capacity is insufficient to grasp the complexity of what is going on, thus limiting our leaders' ability to develop realistic visions and our ability to understand them. The recent interest in systems thinking reflects a growing recognition that our ability to grasp how the world works is limited and that we need to learn spe-

cial analytical techniques to help decipher real world dynamics.<sup>5</sup>

Most organizational learning theories focus on knowledge acquisition and insight; they imply that the essence of learning is the acquisition of information and knowledge through various kinds of cognitive activities. This point of view ignores two facts. First, such learning can occur only if the learner recognizes a problem and is motivated to learn to a sufficient degree to overcome Anxiety 1. Second, even with insight the learner often cannot consistently produce the right kind of behavior

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or skill to solve the problem. Insight does not automatically change behavior, and, until our behavior has changed and we have observed new results, we do not know whether what we are learning cognitively is valid or not.

#### Habit and Skill Learning

A second kind of learning is the acquisition of behavioral habits and skills; it is usually associated with B.F. Skinner and behaviorism. This is the kind of learning symbolized by the use of the carrot instead of the stick, the creation of incentives to do the right thing, and the immediate rewarding of correct behavior. In this model, errors and wrong behavior are not punished but are ignored so that the learner remains focused on improving and refining correct behavior. This kind of learning is always slow because it requires practice and a willingness to be temporarily incompetent. Anyone who has tried to learn to play golf or tennis or to become competent on a computer knows how this feels. To be temporarily incompetent is uncomfortable, so we experience Anxiety 1. But this kind of learning is also very reliable. If we overcome our incompetence, begin to produce the correct behavior, and receive rewards for it, we will eventually develop stable new habits.

The most difficult aspect of such learning is overcoming bad habits and cultural rules. For example, Chris Argyris has shown in many ways that organizations would be more effective if people were more open with each other when they solve problems, but it is ex-

tremely difficult to get them to be open because of cultural rules about saving face and protecting ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

This problem is especially relevant to leaders because habit and skill learning require us to embrace and tolerate errors as a valuable part of the learning process. As Donald Michael has argued persuasively, embracing errors is about the last thing most leaders are willing to do. As followers we collude with our leaders in hoping that they will not commit errors, thus putting them into the position of always claiming to be doing the right thing even when everyone knows making such claims is the wrong thing to do.

For habit and skill learning to take hold, we need opportunities to practice and to make errors. We need consistent rewards not only for correct responses but also for detecting errors so that they can be corrected. Rewards for error detection are often lacking. This kind of learning, therefore, is constrained not only by the difficulty of getting the right response in the first place but also by the lack of a safe environment in which to prac-

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...tice and make lots of errors. The culture of management is built around the assumption that mistakes will occur but that one should not make the same mistake twice. To learn a complex new skill, however, we will make mistakes over and over again as we practice and slowly get better. To speed up this kind of learning we have to provide practice fields and coaching in a psychologically safe environment.<sup>7</sup>

Unlearning is emotionally difficult because the old way of doing things, after all, has worked for a while and become embedded. Doing things the old way makes life stable and predictable, and efforts to try new things have in the past often led to failure and pain. It is the history of past success and our human need to have a stable and predictable environment that gives culture such force. Culture is the accumulation of past learning and thus reflects past successes, but some cultural assumptions and behavioral rituals can become so stable that they are difficult to unlearn even when they become dysfunctional.<sup>8</sup> In order to understand this, we need to take note of the third kind of learning, the kind that is most often ignored and least understood — learning based on punishment.

### Emotional Conditioning and Learned Anxiety

The third kind of learning is the most potent and the most difficult to speak about — emotional conditioning, which is associated with Pavlov. If you put a dog in a green room, ring a bell, and then give the dog a painful electric shock, it will fairly quickly learn to avoid green rooms, and, if it hears a bell, the dog will run away or cower anxiously. Even if you turn the shocks in the green room off, the dog will not enter it and, therefore, will not discover that the shock is off. If you teach a dog to avoid a green room in this way, allow it to jump into a red room as escape, and then give it shocks in the red room, the dog will jump back and forth between the green and red rooms until totally exhausted, *and this behavior will continue even after you have turned off the shock in both rooms*. Once the pattern has been learned, the anxiety alone is enough to keep the behavior going even if no shocks are ever again administered. That is partly the psychological basis for human phobias — Anxiety 1 is sufficient to keep us from finding out whether the dreaded behavior or place is dangerous or not. If the dog *had* to learn to live in a green room full of bells, it would take a long process of deconditioning and desensitization to overcome the phobia.

Emotional conditioning occurs in response to rewards as well as when a dog learns to respond positively to a bell that is rung just prior to when the dog is fed. But it is important to recognize that the unlearning process is not symmetrical. If the food stops coming after the bell, the dog realizes this immediately and gradual unlearning begins. However, if the dog always avoids the green room when the bell is rung, the dog may not ever discover that the shock is no longer being administered. Therefore, avoidance behavior learned through punishment not only is more stable than behavior learned through reward but also does not tell the learner what the correct response is and does not encourage trial and error learning. People who are punished across a wide range of behavior are likely to limit themselves to very narrow safe ranges or become paralyzed for fear of making mistakes.

If our shared cultural assumptions are based primarily on past mistakes, it will be much more difficult to change than if they are based primarily on past successes, because even the idea of new approaches and new types of behavior is likely to elicit Anxiety 1, which will make us fall back on behavior patterns that were reliable in avoiding punishment in the past. To the extent that our present managerial theories emphasize the stick over the carrot, we are building in strong resistances to new learning. Peter DeLisi of Digital Equipment Corp-

oration has used the "whack a gopher" game as a metaphor for the many organizational cultures he has encountered that stifle creativity and innovation. The object of this popular penny arcade game is to hammer down little gopher heads that appear at random intervals in the holes of the game board. The organizational version of whack a gopher, wherein people who stick their necks out get whacked, is comparable to motivating with a stick.

In the organizational world, the green room can be something that the company once tried that did not work, or it can simply be anything new in an organization that has consistently punished rule-breaking behavior in the past. If you put the dog on a black platform, ring a bell, and give it a painful shock anytime it tries to get off the platform into the green room around it, just the ringing of the bell will be sufficient to keep the dog on the black platform. And as long as there is enough food on the platform, the dog will happily live out its

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life there. Our present habits, values, and assumptions are our black platform, and sometimes any proposed change can be a bell signifying that we are about to jump into a scary green room. Life on the black platform can be basically comfortable. So when a new leader comes on with a new vision that is for many organizational members a green room, the vision may sound great but the prospect of changing our behavior induces sufficient Anxiety 1 and dread that we do not listen or try anything new.

For example, if employees have been through several traumatic reorganizations that involved downsizing or other painful events, they may come to treat all proposed change programs or reorganizations as bells that signal once again that they are being forced into a green room. Or, equally restrictive, if employees remember that certain past strategies have not worked well, they will treat those strategies as green rooms and will avoid them or cower anxiously instead of working productively. If they cower anxiously, they will not produce the new behavior that the change agent or coach is anxious to reward. New visions cannot overcome these feelings because our complex human mind is able to defend itself against messages that make us anxious. The three

most common defenses are (1) not to hear the message in the first place, (2) to deny that the message applies, and (3) to rationalize that our leaders do not understand the situation. You cannot talk people out of their learned Anxiety 1. How then do we move forward? How do we manage Anxiety 1?

## Managing the Anxieties of Change

The answer is paradoxical. We must create a new anxiety, Anxiety 2, and it must be greater than Anxiety 1 for new learning to occur. At the same time, it must not be so great as to cause defensiveness and paralysis. How is this done? Accumulated change theory tells us that human systems seek homeostasis and equilibrium. We prefer a predictable stable world, and we do not let our creative energies out unless our psychological world is reasonably stable. We seek the largest possible black platform on which to rest comfortably and only step off into gray areas once in a while to satisfy our curiosity or our creative energy. For an organization to change, therefore, it must first be destabilized, or in Kurt Lewin's old phrase, "unfrozen." To speed up learning, we must speed up the unfreezing process. Unfreezing requires simultaneous management of three processes.

- **Disconfirmation.** The organizational members must come to perceive that their current ways of doing things are no longer working. There is not enough food on the black platform, or it is beginning to rock dangerously, or something else bad is happening on it or to it. Change managers must make disconfirming data highly visible to all members of the organization, and such data must be convincing. Just saying that the organization is in trouble because profit levels are down, market share is being lost, customers are complaining, costs are too high, or good people are leaving is not enough. Employees and managers at all levels must believe the data, and that often requires *intense communication and economic education*, which has often been lacking in organizations. Employees often simply do not understand or do not believe it when management says, "We are in trouble."

- **Creation of Guilt or Anxiety.** Even if people believe disconfirming data, they may not be motivated to change because they do not connect the information to something they care about. They perceive the data to be related to other parts of the platform than the part they are living on. For change motivation to be aroused, they must discover that if they do *not* learn something new, they will either fail to meet some of their important ideals, which will make them feel guilty, or they will put their job or security in jeopardy, which will make them

feel anxious. We have all seen how employees do not take management information seriously until they feel ashamed or personally threatened. This is what I mean by Anxiety 2 — the fear, shame, or guilt associated with *not* learning anything new.

Having to arouse anxiety or guilt sounds paradoxical because I have just said that anxiety gets in the way of learning. But we are dealing with two kinds of anxiety: Anxiety 1 is associated with doing something new and Anxiety 2 is associated with continuing to do something that we know will lead to failure. Motivating people to learn, then, requires building up enough disconfirming data to cause enough Anxiety 2 to override prior condi-

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tioning without building up so much anxiety that people go into a defensive paralysis. Creating Anxiety 2 is what is colloquially called "getting someone's attention."

Paradoxically, anxiety prevents learning, but anxiety is necessary to start learning as well. Managing learning or a change process means managing these two kinds of anxiety. Three separate processes are involved.

First, Anxiety 1 must be present or induced in order to avoid immediate bad experiences. For instance, we induce Anxiety 1 when we teach a child to be scared to cross a street.

Second, Anxiety 2 must be induced through disconfirmation, as when we also teach the child to be scared *not* to cross the street because never crossing a street leads to other undesirable outcomes, such as never going anywhere.

Third, Anxiety 2 must end up being greater than Anxiety 1. We can ensure this by supportively reducing Anxiety 1 until Anxiety 2 is sufficiently greater to motivate action, that is, by providing psychological safety.

- **Creation of Psychological Safety.** When we teach a child to cross the street, we hold the child's hand as we cross, or we provide a safety-producing behavioral ritual such as looking both ways before crossing. We provide a path, a direction, and some first steps to get started on the dangerous journey. We provide encouragement, support, and coaching. We say that if you look both ways and listen for cars you will be able to tell whether or not it is safe. Having built up the anxiety of not doing anything (Anxiety 2), we then provide a cognitive solution,

a direction of change to overcome the Anxiety 1 of crossing the street, entering the green room, or making organizational changes.

For change to happen, people have to feel psychologically safe; that is, they have to see a manageable path forward, a direction that will not be catastrophic. They have to feel that a change will not jeopardize their current sense of identity and wholeness. They must feel that new habits are possible, that they can learn something new and maybe even enter the green room without feeling too anxious. Good coaches are well aware of this tension. They are masters at creating sufficient Anxiety 2 to motivate learning and sufficient direction and support to reduce Anxiety 1 enough to allow learning to occur.

Charismatic leaders can sometimes articulate powerful visions that provide the necessary psychological safety for learning if they sketch out not only a longer-range sense of direction but also some immediate steps that are manageable. These steps allow us to make a gradual entry into the green room so that we learn that the shock has been turned off. Or leaders can redefine the boundaries of the black platform and the green room, thereby seducing people into discovering that the green

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room isn't so bad because to some degree they are already in it. Leaders exhibit this mechanism when they show people that they are already doing innovative things and then reward them for it.

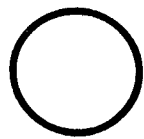
Some essential elements of a psychologically safe environment are (1) opportunities for training and practice, (2) support and encouragement to overcome the fear and shame associated with making errors, (3) coaching and rewards for efforts in the right direction, (4) norms that legitimize the making of errors, and (5) norms that reward innovative thinking and experimentation. Such norms are difficult to develop in the day-to-day world of business or government because of the anxieties associated with making mistakes. To create an error-tolerant environment in which to practice, we must move temporarily out of the daily pressure of organizational life. How do we do this?

The key to reducing anxiety in organizations is based on the psychological fact that it is easier to tolerate anxi-

ery in the presence of sympathetic others than alone.<sup>10</sup> To speed up learning, therefore, we must create psychological safety by creating temporary *parallel systems* in which to develop new norms that favor learning, and these parallel systems must be built around *supportive groups* that help to contain and reduce Anxiety 1.<sup>11</sup>

## Parallel Learning Systems

The suggestions that follow are based on four assumptions. First, one cannot ask others to learn something new if one has not learned something new oneself. Second, learning requires some period of stepping outside of one's own culture, national or organizational, before one can discover the limitations of one's own present (the black platform) and the possibilities inherent in other cultures (the green room). Third, the anxieties inherent in this new learning are manageable only if they are shared and managed jointly in a group that is accountable for the organization's ultimate welfare. A trusting group can help leaders to own up to and deal



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with their anxieties, which is a necessary process if realistic planning and learning are to take place. And, fourth, the learning process will not spread across the entire organization unless a transition group is created that will be accountable for the organizational learning process.<sup>12</sup> A group is necessary to create the supportive climate that will give the leaders a sense of psychological safety and help them to own the total organizational learning process. This process can be described in terms of the following steps.

**1. Leaders Must Learn Something New.** Before anyone else changes, leaders must overcome their own cultural assumptions and perceive new ways of doing things and new contexts in which to do them. They must acknowledge and deal with their own Anxiety 1 before they can appreciate and deal with the anxieties of others. Such learning can be speeded up if leaders spend more time outside their own organizations. They cannot obtain insights into the limitations of their organizational cultures unless they expose themselves to other cultures — national, occupational, and organizational. Leaders

should systematically attend programs and conferences where they are exposed to new ideas, other leaders, academics, consultants, and members of other occupations. They should also engage in activities that will help them gain insight into how to discover, confront, and deal with their own Anxiety 1.

Boards of directors, investors, and others who select and supervise leaders play a key role in this process; they have to manage the unfreezing process for the leader. They have to find ways of disconfirming present assumptions, inducing Anxiety 2, and, most important, making leaders feel psychologically safe so that they can learn something new before starting to unfreeze their own organizations.

**2. Leaders Must Create a Change Management Group.**<sup>13</sup> This group must itself learn something new and then help the rest of the organization into the green room. Such groups are sometimes called steering committees, and they serve several critical functions. First, they provide a supportive environment in which the leaders can express and handle their own anxieties and insecurities. Second, they represent the organizational culture and can provide an initial test of the level of transformation possible without too much disruption of the present culture. Third, they create and monitor the task forces and problem-solving groups that will tackle specific change programs. And, fourth, they collectively and individually communicate why change is needed and how it will be accomplished. By their own learning example they create psychological safety for others.

The steering committee usually involves some members of top management, but not necessarily all of it, and it can include members of all the relevant subcultures that may be involved in the change. Work on the steering committee should be at least half to three-quarters time if learning is to be speeded up.

**3. The Steering Committee Must Go through Its Own Learning Process.** In order to spread new norms throughout the organization, the steering committee must begin to develop these norms within itself. This usually involves visiting other organizations, bringing in organization development consultants, and undergoing some joint training in team work. The point is to develop a culture that is different from that of the main organization, a culture that favors innovation and learning.

For this group to function well, it must develop a high level of mutual trust, and it must feel accountable as a group for organizational learning. The most difficult step in its work is to discover how both kinds of anxiety operate to undermine learning. For example, group members must recognize that being argumenta-

tive, defensive, impatient with how long things take, and impatient with other points of view can be symptoms of Anxiety 2 (that change will *not* happen), and they must figure out how to work through these prob-

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lems. The steering committee's problems will be prototypes of the kinds of problems that will be encountered when the transformation is attempted on a wider scale. In a sense the steering committee must learn how to learn, which implies learning not only what to learn but how to learn it.

**4. The Steering Committee Must Design the Organizational Learning Process.** The committee must first diagnose the organization's learning needs and then plan and design the organizational learning process by creating a set of task forces or learning groups to deal with each of the major issues. In order to do this, the committee must intensify its own diagnostic activities and learn how to translate its general sense of where the organization needs to go into a set of discrete and workable problems. As each of these is identified, a working group must be created to develop change plans for that area. The steering committee selects the members of these groups according to the tasks to be performed. The work on these task forces is the major assignment for the members.

**5. The Task Forces Must Learn How to Learn.** They must have an intensive and rapid learning experience in order to plan effectively for the whole organization. If they cannot develop new norms and skills more favorable to learning, they also will fail to produce the necessary changes in the larger organization.

**6. The Task Forces Must Create Specific Change Programs.** After the task forces develop plans, the steering committee reviews them to ensure that they are realistic and coordinated with the work of other task forces.

**7. Throughout the Process, the Steering Committee Must Maintain Communication.** The members of the steering committee communicate extensively and intensively to the whole organization to keep everyone apprised of what is happening. They continue the unfreezing process by creating psychological safety as the

pressures for change mount. If the organization has not already invested in education, especially pertaining to the economics of the business, the steering committee's communication efforts must include intensive education to build some credibility for the messages that are sent as part of the change process.

**8. The Steering Committee Must Develop Mechanisms for Continuous Learning.** Although the learning process begins as a project to make one major transition, the learning organization will discover that what it has launched has to become a way of life and that the norms supporting learning have to be reinforced perpetually.

## Conclusions

The whole process involves many steps and many meetings, but getting started need not take much time if we can overcome some of our cultural assumptions about time management. Committees can be appointed and can undergo intensive learning experiences in a matter of days or weeks. Task forces similarly can work rapidly if they work for days and weeks at a time instead of the usual one-meeting-per-week routine. Meetings can be held off-site for two to three days at a time. Leaders and the steering committee members have to set the example and, thereby, begin to change the norms regarding time allocation.

The key is to remember that people will be anxious, but that Anxiety 2 is a source of constructive motivation for change if it is based on valid disconfirming information. At the same time, new responses, attitudes, and assumptions will not be learned without the psychological safety of the parallel structure and the opportunity to make errors, to practice, and to innovate in a safe environment — in other words, to overcome Anxiety 1. Once new responses are learned, the reward system must be in place to reinforce them.

To put all of this in very plain language, the problem of organizational learning and transformation is to overcome the negative effects of past carrots and sticks, especially past sticks. To make people feel safe in learning, they must have a motive, a sense of direction, and the opportunity to try out new things without fear of punishment. Sticks are not very useful during the learning process. Once the learning is underway, the carrot is the essential learning tool. The environment will take care of providing the sticks if the organization is on the wrong path.

The details of how this works will be different for every organization. But the essential dynamics of anxiety, effects of organizational culture, and needs for psy-

chological safety during the learning process are likely to be universal and cannot be ignored. If you are a leader and want to speed up the learning process in your organization, start with an analysis of yourself and your own learning needs. Then consider what anxieties, defenses, and cultural assumptions stand in your way. Think particularly about how to create the necessary psychological safety for people so they feel they can learn. Think about how to create a parallel learning system that can begin to build a culture more conducive to perpetual learning, drawing particularly upon group support to cope with anxiety. Only when you have done all of this will you know whether your visions and incentives will be enough to enable the members of your organization to dare to enter the green room and to do so faster. ♦

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