
THE LEARNING ORGANISATION AGAINST A CEILING: CAN IT MOVE BEYOND THE BARRIER?

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ABSTRACT

In this critical literature review of the learning organisation and specifically the spirituality dimension of the concept, the aim is to identify possible aspects that will assist in operationalising the idea. The learning organisation concept is well-established and has been applied globally since being made popular in 1990 by Peter Senge. The concept promised huge potential and in many cases made a significant difference in the organisations where it was implemented. The emphasis is on learning in the organisation which makes it possible to adapt more rapidly to changes in the environment. However, its implementation was met with mixed success. For many reasons it is difficult or even impossible to establish the ideal learning organisation. This article proposes that one of the variables that inhibited proper implementation of the learning organisation concept can be the lack of accounting for spirituality in the organisation. Spirituality in organisations (such as a sense of purpose, and meaningful engagement) is a fundamental assumption of the learning organisation. More research needs to be done to investigate the role of spirituality in an organisational context with the aim of unlocking the potential of operationalising the learning organisation concept.

Keywords: learning organisation, spirituality, organisational communication, Society of Organisational Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to look critically at the literature relating to learning organisations to determine whether a renewed focus on the spiritual dimensions of the learning organisation may allow it to overcome the obstacles currently preventing organisations to convert fully to ideal learning organisations.

The motivation to reconsider the role of spirituality in the implementation of the learning organisation has two sources. Firstly, 25 years after conception and attempts to implementation, there are still problems establishing ideal learning organisations – as will be discussed later. Secondly, in the past couple of years there has been a surge of research focusing on spirituality in the workplace. One of those was a study by Van der Walt (2006), which, focusing on communication in organisations, made the link between spirituality and the workplace. This prompted this investigation, so as to probe whether spirituality in the workplace could not serve as a focus for implementation of the learning organisation.

In 1990, Peter Senge published *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation*. The idea of the learning organisation took off and quickly gave rise to a number of global initiatives to establish and apply the concept. Although Senge's work (1990) popularised the concept, it was, at the time, not entirely unknown. The learning organisation developed an extensive network of followers all over the world: the Society of Organisational Learning (SoL) has been in existence since 1997 (with its own publication, *Reflections*) and *Learning Organisation*, a scholarly journal, is published by Emerald, with up to six editions per year. The SoL is a network of global practitioners and consultants that engage in what they call "action research" – which is basically experimental in determining what works and what does not (*Reflections* 2013).

However, the idea of the learning organisation has also been questioned. For example, Weir and Örtenblad (2013) acknowledge the concept's existence, but ask for a revision of its basic foundations. According to Weir and Örtenblad (2013), it is "generally accepted that the true 'learning organisation' is rather like the fabulous unicorn in that it is more commonly talked about than encountered". Similarly, Caldwell (2012) asks whether the learning organisation, as a concept, is not too vague to be of use. On a more radical note, Grieves (2008) poses the question whether the learning organisation as an imaginative concept has not run its course and should be abandoned. He bases his proposal on his analysis of the basic premises of the learning organisation, which found its theoretical and methodological premises wanting.

The problem is that, despite a large number of research efforts and publications on the topic, not much progress has been made to take the idea beyond its original

conceptualisation and definition. As an example, the educationalist Lara Fenwick (2001: 86) is highly critical of the concept but comes to the following conclusion:

Questions about these issues are posed not to destroy the promise held by learning organisation approaches to workplace learning but to clarify its discourse. Until its premises become clear, efforts to implement the learning organisation ideal will continually be challenged by real human beings and their needs, which weave together to create an organisation.

Örtenblad (2004: 349) supports Fenwick's (2001: 84) argument for the need to have thorough theoretical foundations established to operationalise the learning organisation and argues that "more research is required regarding whether and how learning organisations can be both effective and beneficial for employees". This was again confirmed in Örtenblad's 2013 publication *Handbook of research on the learning organisation*, in which he argues for more fundamental research to solve the problems standing in the way of learning organisations fulfilling their potential.

The question this article aims to answer is whether a renewed focus on spirituality in the learning organisation debate can contribute to overcoming the obstacles which prevent the full implementation of the learning organisation.

THE LEARNING ORGANISATION IDEA – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Senge (1990: 14) defines a learning organisation as one that learns and encourages learning among its constituent members. It promotes the exchange of information between employees, hence creating a more knowledgeable workforce. He says a learning organisation is "an organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future". The result: "... produces a very flexible organisation where people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision ... The learning organisation is one in which people at all levels, individuals and collectively, is continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about" (Senge 1990). For Senge (1990: 3), the learning organisation is a "place 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 act together".

Senge (1990) based his concept on what he called the "five disciplines", namely systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision building and team learning. Senge (1990: 69) proposed that these disciplines, which are briefly discussed below, must be used together to meet organisations' aspirations:

- ♦ *Personal mastery* represents how individuals learn to expand their own capacity and to influence other employees to develop;
- ♦ Creating *mental models* involve introspection by employees towards shaping and creating personal success. Mental models impact on our perceptions and will influence how we understand the world and also how we will take action;
- ♦ *Shared vision* is the commitment by employees towards a shared outcome of the organisation – mobilise people around a core identity and a sense of destiny. It should be possible to be translated into realisable actions;
- ♦ *Team learning* is how individuals realise that it is insufficient to develop themselves in isolation, but to alter their thought processes to align with team intelligence and success; and
- ♦ *Systems thinking* involves employees' understanding of the interrelatedness of interdependencies within the organisation.

Senge (1990) opines that these five disciplines sum up the requirements for an organisation to learn through its employees, thereby influencing the innovation factor from within the organisation.

Other definitions of the learning organisation developed over time. Gephart, Marsick, Van Buren and Spiro (1996) see a learning organisation as one that is able to learn, to adjust, and to change in response to new realities. These authors also see the learning organisation as “one that is striving for excellence through continual renewal”. Hitt (1995: 18) provided a definition that is more relevant to results-based management by defining a learning organisation “... as one that focuses on developing and using its information and knowledge capabilities in order to create higher-valued information and knowledge, to change behaviors, and to improve bottom-line results”. A more comprehensive definition of a learning organisation by King (2001) states that it is “... an organisation which learns powerfully and collectively and is continually transforming itself to better collect, manage, and use knowledge for corporate success. It empowers people within and outside the company to learn as they work. Technology is utilized to optimize both learning and productivity.” Bradbery and Sturt (2007: 79-80) listed and summarised 25 definitions dating from 1990 to 2004. Two issues emerged from that list. Firstly, it represented a large variety of views that were selected to fit the purposes of the different authors. Secondly, the primary common element was the dominance of learning processes as the core of the definitions.

Depending on how learning organisations are defined, organisational learning can either be seen as an aspect of the learning organisation – or, as some researchers

argue, that the learning organisation can be seen as a special case of organisational learning (Örtenblad 2013: 23).

Borrowing from Senge, Du Plessis (2008) sees learning organisations as:

... those where all sections and staff are encouraged to learn, share institutional knowledge, capture the knowledge and are allowed to independently and in teams innovate and change in response to changes in the environment. In these organisations, the members are driven by purpose, and experience what they do as meaningful.

Du Plessis (2008) then links this definition of the learning organisation to communication by saying “to establish and maintain learning organisations, authentic communication and the values associated with it, is the key to align it to society to keep up with changes that occur”. He then uses the following metaphor to illustrate his perspective of the learning organisation:

To describe the ideal new learning organisation the analogy applies of a sophisticated machine where all the different components and functions are (independently) self-adjusting in response to variables that change. Communication in the organisation plays a critical role in making this possible.

Du Plessis (2008) summarised the understanding of the authors of the definitions of the concept by stating that learning organisations rely on learning by all members of staff – especially in the normal day-to-day activities and in teams that work together. It is about an attitude of asking how to do things better and more effectively, analysing current practices critically and applying collective wisdom to solve new problems. Ideally, learning organisations should encourage individuals to think innovatively, as well as discuss new ideas informally with like-minded individuals, and then to set up task teams to interrogate and plan and implement new ideas. These individuals then receive acknowledgement and encouragement for innovations which serve the collective.

There is general consensus among the different authors that if the principles and tenets of the learning organisation can be properly applied, organisations can benefit from becoming a “learning organisation” (Du Plessis 2008):

What happened in practice? The implementation of Senge’s original concept focussed on systems theory and highlighted the methodologies and pedagogies of organisational learning. This provided some benefit to organisations attempting to become learning organisations. Much of the research and ‘results’ in the SoL publication *Reflections* report on

success stories where learning was effective in organisations (without necessarily becoming prototype learning organisations).

Blackman (2013: 372) identified three issues that came out of an analysis of scholarly research on learning organisations (in contrast to what the practitioners/consultants report on, for example, in *Reflections*):

Firstly, that, in many cases the stories were of difficulties, problems and, in some cases, failures in terms of the development of emergences of learning organisations within certain contexts. Secondly, the fact that although context was seen as a framing element in each case ... there was often no analysis of the context in a way which would permit clear comparisons or investigation across the cases. Thirdly ... [i]t is of note that so many of the chapters are still building on work by Senge.

Örtenblad (2013: 22) is of the opinion that the literature on the learning organisation – from studies about the relevance of the idea to the contexts of organisations – are still based on the “well-known frameworks such as Senge’s five disciplines from 1990”. These five disciplines offer the potential to address the problems that are articulated in the next section, but are currently not exploited to their full potential.

It is, therefore, clear that the ideas conceptualised in 1990 by Senge have remained relatively stagnant and have not developed to such an extent as to allow them to be operationalised in a fairly standardised way.

OBSTACLES TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Not only was the learning concept criticised from a practical and theoretical perspective, but, as early as the mid-nineties, also ideologically. Coopey (1995) questioned the issues of power and politics in the basic assumptions of the learning organisation. He raised three concerns. Firstly, he indicated a neglect of political activity encountered in the learning organisation, and secondly, that although employees will be empowered, the power of managers will be cemented by their privileged access to informational and symbolic resources. Lastly, “... is that the concept of the ‘learning organisation’ is expressed in ways that provide raw material for managerial ideology, potentially constraining the meanings and actions of other employees so that they support the interests of the dominant coalition” (Coopey 1995: 210).

Weir and Örtenblad (2013) identify three types of obstacles that organisations encounter that prevent them from becoming a learning organisation.

The primary obstacle preventing the introduction of the learning organisation which the authors identified is what they call inability obstacles (i.e. organisations want to become learning organisations but cannot because of an inability to do so).

The first inability obstacle is difficulty in understanding what a learning organisation is. The most commonly encountered problem with the learning organisation is that the concept is vague and/or ambiguous (Grieves 2008; Furnham 2004). Weir and Örtenblad (2013) say that the lack of understanding and clarity about the concept is a major obstacle and adds to the confusion. They add that the complexity of multiple learning processes may be contradictory or even conflicting. Even when the idea is clear, there may be difficulties in implementing it. “The learning organisation may be one of those great-sounding ideas that just do not work because they are hard to operationalize and thus not practical” (Weir & Örtenblad 2013: 73).

Furthermore, managers may not be prepared, equipped and able to lead these processes. A perfectly functioning prototype of a learning organisation which is in line with the concept’s ideals (and which is able to be emulated) is challenging to find. Even the literature and research claiming benefits are not based on clinical empirical evidence. The lack of evidence “... undoubtedly implies that the implementation difficulties are greater than many consultants and protagonists appreciate” (Weir & Örtenblad 2013: 74). These authors also state that myths play a suppressive role, “... we think that we know, but we do not”.

In addition to the above, two other obstacles could be identified. The first is a lack of resources, such as time for staff members to reflect and learn; the second is not having the right people in the organisation to promote the concept. It was found (Weir & Örtenblad 2013: 77) that the idea often attracts “certain types of people who are not necessarily those who typically emerge into leadership positions in formal organisations”.

The second obstacle may be that people do not know that they do not want to adopt the idea (inertia obstacles). An organisation may be structured in such a way that they are organised around hierarchies and both vertical and lateral barriers to authority and communication (silos) – which create small suboptimal empires of knowledge which cannot be broken down (Weir & Örtenblad 1993: 78). Leaders and participants may also be unwilling to engage in introspection – action is usually preferred to reflection.

The last obstacle is the expectation that success should translate into profitability or another benchmark of desirable outcomes. This “fear of failure can become self-defeating by creating cycles of more limited action around a restricted range of options” (Weir & Örtenblad 2013: 79).

Typically, authors would develop simple solutions for highly complex problems. Maden (2012: 82) proposes such a simple process to convert public service organisations into learning organisations (with the focus solely on learning as a tool and outcome):

On the whole, the proposed transformation model shows that there are three consecutive processes in converting public organisations into learning organisations. Firstly, public organisations should strive to build a learning climate within their boundaries through enhancing structural, cultural, and leadership capacities to learn that will respectively increase their existing individual and collective learning capacities. As these capacities increase, they will facilitate higher knowledge creation within public organisations with the utilization of both internal and external sources of learning. Knowledge creation can be considered as the initial step of organisational learning that should be complemented by an effective knowledge management process in order to achieve the goal of being a ‘learning organisation’.

In this “solution”, all of the possible obstacles Weir and Örténblad refer to can be encountered – without any provision to overcome these obstacles.

The question is whether it is possible to move beyond the “classical” learning organisation concept with its limitations and problems regarding operationalisation of the concept.

SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Spirituality associated with the learning organisation

The issue of spirituality in an organisational context, as well as those associated with learning, is well documented. Bradbery and Sturt (2007) refer to the learning organisation as a radical model deviating from the traditional command and control view of organising to a “liberating structure based on faith and trust”. They reach the conclusion that the learning organisation exists in a spiritual context because of its continual search for meaning – in many ways.

Senge himself did not stagnate after the original development of the learning organisation concept. There were two developments in his thinking. In an interview in *Reflections* (2013: 42-43) Senge indicated that whilst he started off with the learning organisation, “learning communities”, which cross the borders of organisations, have now emerged:

You would have these practical projects, let’s say on product development, as were some of the early projects. But they didn’t involve

the management team or any one well-defined group. They engaged an amorphous network of people who ultimately got involved and became instrumental to what was accomplished. So you start to see again and again that the real groups that matter are never the formal structures, the formal teams, the formal management. They include those but are much broader. Practically speaking, the best term for them is communities or networks of collaboration.

Many of these communities of collaboration are the result of the networks of practitioners and consultants collaborating globally in the SoL. It still does not question the basic fundamentals that were developed in 1990. However, it is moving towards a more universal position in line with what can be called a spiritual position in a postmodern context.

Secondly, since Senge's original work, he also moved on to place more emphasis on the idea of purpose in order to guide learning. It is generally accepted that the concept of the learning organisation begins with the idea of a vision for the organisation. In 2004 Senge (2004: 16-18) proposed that organisations bring their missions to life – to nurture the sense of purposefulness:

First, the mission is personal and immediate. It is not lofty or abstract. It is not even, ironically, about the future. Purposefulness is intrinsic to the present moment, when I am aware that what I am doing is truly meaningful. I can feel connected to a larger or shared purpose only when I have some clarity about my personal purpose, or 'who I am and the purpose of my existence'.

In addition, Senge (2008: 4) opines that an organisation's mission should be active and concrete – it should connect a sense of purposefulness with the future. It should also be the motive that connects the people involved with each other and to the external environment. It builds a sense of community. However, to create such a sense of community, it is necessary for people to expose their true selves and made themselves vulnerable, so as to create a climate of trust (this also plays on the idea of knowing yourself and to communicate this knowledge to others to make authentic communication possible in the existentialist tradition).

Senge (2004) also emphasises the role of all stakeholders by urging organisations to really understand the people they are interacting with as part of the external environment – the people in whose interest they act. He uses the example of World Bank employees who spent a week with one of the developing communities they were targeting for assistance – they had to understand the circumstances of those people in order to empathetically visualise their own roles in the bigger picture.

Senge (2008: 4) reiterates that people first need to have a personal vision for the unit and organisation – the organisational vision should be built on the positive visions of individuals. These visions for the organisation and individuals should be dynamic and able to adapt to changes in the environment. The organisational vision should be translated into a mission that will operationalise the concept further. The emphasis is therefore on a bottom-up approach as a basis for the development of an organisational vision and mission that employees and other stakeholders can relate to and take ownership of.

Spirituality in the workplace

Sorakraikitikul and Sununta (2014: 175-178) make out a case that it is proven by various studies that accommodating human values and spirituality in the workplace is beneficial for both the employee and the organisation. In their own empirical study, they investigated the impact of cultivating an organisational learning culture on the spiritual integration of employees. They came to the conclusion that “[o]rganisational learning culture shapes the contextual environment for knowledge sharing and, at the same time stimulates employees’ perceptions that their work and lives have meaning. This enables members to integrate their lives and energy into the workplace” (Sorakraikitikul & Sununta 2014: 187-188). What they found was that the processes associated with the organisational learning culture itself contributed positively to employees’ spiritual experience. It also contributes to the commitment of staff to the goals and outcomes of their tasks (equal to a “calling”). This has an important implication for the proposal of a renewed focus on spirituality in the organisation that is proposed in this article.

The challenge for most ordinary organisations is to get a commitment from their employees. Unfortunately, such a commitment cannot be bought. Commitment must be embedded in idealism. Block (2004: 4) argues that, while most people are born idealists, they suppress that idealism when they become cynical adults whose self-interest dominates. People like this first ask “What is in it for me?” before they act. Once commitment is traded for a pay-off, its transactional nature excludes it from being real, authentic commitment. The challenge for organisations is to combine purpose with everyday activities to ensure real commitment.

Learning organisations are also associated with excellence and innovation, as Ahmed (1998) explains. Ahmed (1998: 34) identifies four cultural traits and values associated with effectiveness, excellence and innovation in organisations. The last of these is an organisational and personal mission-driven activity: “A sense of mission provides purpose and meaning and can become the source that provides a number of other non-economic reasons why the existence and work of the organisation is important. It also defines the appropriate course of action for the organisation and its members.”

Organisations in pre-modern times were characterised by a sense of community, with a dense network of personal relationships (based on kinship and direct face-to-face contact, unwritten norms and mutual interdependence), which had to make way for rationally organised modernist societies (Baran & Davis 2003).

Van der Walt (2006) investigates the changes in postmodern society and the need for a spiritual intelligent framework of organisational communication. She concludes that society changed in a postmodern era, with the members of society having expectations and needs that are not accommodated in organisations still conceptualised in a modern framework – and that employees remain alienated from their work. Effectively, it means that the values and practices that people accept as valid and appropriate in their functioning as members of society (democracy, service delivery, freedom of expression, sense-making and purposeful living, etc.) do not apply to them in their roles as employees in organisations. Organisations expect a completely different set of expectations and, in essence, require employees to live compartmentalised lives – detaching their occupational life from what they fundamentally expect as members of society. For hundreds of years, people were able to influence their destiny by putting governments in power, exercising their right to free speech, and taking full responsibility for their households and the education of their children. However, many of them, after arriving at work, followed orders mechanically – with little authority or sense of self-determination.

Van der Walt (2006: 420) proposes that organisations need to address the spiritual needs of employees. What are these spiritual needs? In a postmodern context, employees want to be meaningfully engaged in what they do at work. They want to find purpose in what they are doing. They also want to be engaged in something that is bigger than themselves. Whitney (2002:79) says that:

Now, not only do people want their own life to be full of meaning and purpose, but they also expect the same of their organizations. Awakening people want to work for organizations that care and that are consciously contributing to the planet. People want their organizations to make positive contributions to their communities and to the world, and they want work to enliven them.

Many employees are not satisfied to be paid to only do a job, but need to be involved in more than just contributing to the organisation's bottom line. Overell (2002) refers to a survey which indicated that substantial numbers of managers in Britain who resign from their jobs do so on ethical grounds, because they crave values, purpose and identity in organisations that are not solely motivated by profit. According to Overell "... instilling those values is the preoccupation of spirituality at work. It is an aim not that far removed from the human relations

school of management, with all its emphasis on people being subject to ‘a hierarchy of needs’ at the top of which lies ‘self-actualisation’”.

There is a growing awareness of the influence of spirituality on the ethos of organisations and a need to balance the pursuit of profit and the accommodation of spirituality. Crossman (2007) studied a company which was exploring the introduction of “secular spirituality” into their operations and found that they selected products that were consistent with their core spiritual values and “... they set out to consider how these core values would shape approaches to relationships based on respect and concern for employees and clients”. The organisation also “... balanced spiritual practice with profit generation by donating a tenth of their profits to charity and budgeting five percent of employee time to be spent on voluntary service to community charitable projects”. Crossman then linked this to the concept of learning organisations to create a sense of purpose for employees.

Porth, McCall and Bausch (1999: 212) indicate in their study that the learning organisation is an ideal organisational type to “allow the human spirit to flourish so that creativity and innovation are possible”. They then identified spiritual themes that are associated with the learning organisation concept from a religious point of view and concluded that accommodating employees’ spiritual needs are reciprocally beneficial for both parties.

In 1982, before the publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, Kiefer and Senge published an article on what they called metanoic organisations. In this article Kiefer and Senge (1982: 111) declare that at the heart of the metanoic organisation is a deep sense of purposefulness and a vision of the future:

The vision can be abstract, such as excellence, service, or creativity. In one company, people speak of the ‘diamond in the sky’ to symbolize the excellence they strive for. Their vision is also to demonstrate that people are most creative within a context of freedom and responsibility. Alternatively, the vision can be concrete. At one computer manufacturer, the vision is to build a computer that never breaks down. In another, it is to build the world’s largest and most powerful computer.

It is important for team members to be aligned around the shared vision (cf. Bradbery & Sturt 2007). “When a high degree of alignment develops among members of a team committed to a shared vision, the individuals’ sense of relationship and even their concept of self may shift” (Kiefer & Senge 1982: 112). These authors conclude:

The essence of the metanoic shift is the realization within each individual of the extraordinary power of a group committed to a common vision. In metanoic organisations people do not assume they are powerless.

They believe deeply in the power of visioning, the power of the individual to determine his or her own destiny. They know that through responsible participation they can empower each other and ultimately their institutions and society, thereby creating a life that is meaningful and satisfying for everyone.

Stewart (2001) brings another dimension to the spiritual debate by propagating the introduction of narrative theory to capture the full reality of organisational experiences and learning. This will include the full picture of multiple, differing and even possible conflicting interpretations and representations of the experience and learning in organisations. Stewart (2001: 151) concludes: “Emotions need to be brought out of their private closets to the centre stage of organisations through the stories and conversations of members. A new way of working and learning needs to be fostered, where emotions are allowed to given expression and where questions about how one feels are freely asked.”

Bringing spirituality to the centre of learning organisations

It is clear that employees live postmodern lives, but most organisations are still stuck in a modern paradigm that do not accommodate their employees’ needs. The “new” employee has different expectations and ideals. The question is to what extent are these metonoic ideals represented in the conceptualisation of the learning organisation? Although it is the underlying foundation that provides motivation for individual employees to engage with those idealistic activities associated with the learning organisation, it is sorely neglected if the “five disciplines” is accepted uncritically as the sole framework for the establishment of the learning organisation without linking this with spirituality.

The literature on the learning organisation, as well as the research that has already been done to investigate the topic of spirituality in organisations, indicates that the spiritual dimension can be accommodated by Senge’s five disciplines. The “disciplines” are therefore not devoid of spiritual content, but organisational spirituality needs to be explicitly accounted for. Bradbery and Sturt (2007) propose such a framework that accounts for spiritual dimensions in all five of the “disciplines” – which could serve as a starting point to investigate the infusion of the original principles with contemporary spiritual content.

From what the literature indicated in the previous section, the research on spirituality in organisations highlight the following themes:

- ◆ The vision and mission of the organisation mobilise people around goals that are worthwhile;
- ◆ A sense of community – sharing and engaging in collaborative effort on something that gives meaning to the members;

- ♦ An alignment of personal and organisational values that also accommodate religious and secular spirituality;
- ♦ A sense of mission that gives purpose and meaning to staff members and foster commitment; and
- ♦ The accommodation of staff member's emotions, as well as the freedom to express themselves in narratives that will also become organisational narratives.

These themes fit the learning organisation perfectly. These themes are also indicative of the needs and expectations of the postmodern employee. Although much has been done to address spirituality in the workplace – and some of it also within the context of the learning organisation – most of the work done on spirituality does not deal with it as a central assumption of the learning organisation, but as a complementary dimension.

CONCLUSION

The learning organisation is an excellent concept which can be extremely inspirational and certainly capable of focusing organisational attention on the right places – specifically, issues such as organisational learning focusing on employees as not only the object for learning, but also the source of learning, and also interrelatedness and interdependence in organisations.

The learning organisation concept has been implemented with mixed results. The literature indicates that there are problems with the implementation of the learning organisation, with many obstacles in the way of establishing a real prototype of the learning organisation. Many organisations apply some of the principles of the learning organisation, with the focus on the learning components, but with mixed success.

Looking at the needs of the postmodern employee, it is obvious that those needs have to be accommodated in the workplace. There is a growing trend that people need to find meaning in what they do every day. Employees need to be purposefully engaged; they want to make a difference that goes beyond material compensation.

This is exactly the kind of environment the learning organisation has to offer. The learning organisation can provide the context in which employees can meaningfully engage. Is this perhaps the “missing link” that will allow the learning organisation to make a bigger impact?

The primary problem with the learning organisation concept is that it relies on a number of assumptions which have not been tested theoretically or conceptually. The spiritual dimension is a fundamental assumption which is not dealt with as a central point of departure for the implementation of the learning organisation.

Various aspects of organisational spirituality have been documented and investigated. This work confirmed the need to move the issue of spirituality to the centre of the learning organisation debate. Further research needs to be done to investigate the spiritual dimensions of employee needs and the integration thereof with the learning organisation to the extent that it may assist in operationalising the concept more extensively.

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