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The Crossover Point — Firing Up the Learning Organization

When one hears references to the Learning Organization, different words or phrases accompany the conversation, such as learning how to learn, redesigning work, reflecting critically, redirecting effort toward learning, practicing adult learning theories, experimenting, solving problems systematically, learning from customers. Additional ones might be dialoging, sharing vision, mastering personal modeling, learning experientially, thinking systematically. Others could be empowering people, focusing on performance, eliminating deficiencies, overcoming resistances, surmounting difficulties, and maximizing potential.

In all these ideas, as good as they sound, something seems to be missing. Some may suggest that in order for a Learning Organization to flourish, there must be complex tactics and strategies of assimilating increasing amounts of new knowledge, personal thinking, application of problem solving abilities, and highly flexible work loads. Others may think that there needs to be a shift from being "told what to think" toward being "engaged with how to think." Still others are puzzled about what it takes to have a Learning Organization. To state it in very practical terms, what would it take for AAACE to reach the crossover point and get fired up and become a vibrant Learning Organization?

I believe one ingredient would characterize a viable answer "commitment." But each person reading this may ask, "commitment to what?" *First*, the nature of our commitment to do this goes beyond our typical loyalty to AAACE. It involves a commitment to the changes needed in the world (our world) and seeing ourselves and AAACE as instruments for bringing about such changes.

This "commitment" would mean that learning is based on risk taking and not fear of failure.

Second, this is a commitment of ourselves to learning, which I would describe as a shift of mind that goes on inside of each person as she/he undertakes to gain or acquire new knowledge, understanding, skill, attitudes, values, and interests. The shift of mind is in perceiving — sensing or feeling concrete reality, thinking or reasoning abstractly, and the shift of mind is in internalizing or processing — making it a part of ourselves by reflecting on or watching what's happening, or

actively jumping in and trying the newly acquired learning.

Third, the "commitment" includes AAACE's conscious and intentional development of its people and a continuous transformation of itself. This means AAACE's learning takes place in its executive board, general board, commissions, units, conference participants, and readership. Its learning is a constantly, strategically used process — integrated with, and running parallel to, its work. Its learning results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors, and it enhances its capacity for innovation and growth.

Fourth, this "commitment" would mean that its learning is based on risk taking and not fear of failure, team and collective performance rather than individual performance, cooperation and collaboration instead of competition, coaching and supportive feedback in place of appraisal and criticism, informality in contrast with formality, discovery of possibilities replacing one right answer, intuition and relationships in a context overshadowing abstract and logical reasoning, the journey and not the destination.

Fifth, the "commitment" to have AAACE fired up and cross over the line of becoming a Learning Organization, requires it to ask of itself: Which processes that add value to our constituencies need to work better? How can

we make those processes work better? How will we speed up our learning about ways to improve these processes? How can we capture our learning, record it, and transfer it to other processes and parts of the association?

Sixth, the "commitment" needs to take shape in AAACE's mind that, to get fired up and cross over the line of becoming a vibrant Learning Organization, we need to believe this is important and urgent, strengthen our trust that we have the capacity to make this happen, acknowledge our desire and take the initiative to experiment with new projects that will help us grow in maturity and numbers, challenge ourselves to stay involved, support new ideas, and have as much fun and playfulness as possible.

Seventh, the "commitment" to cross over means that we may need to be a bit like Mercedes-Benz as they are establishing an auto plant in Alabama — their first in the U.S.A. They call it a "Learning Field," which speaks about Germans' ambivalence about new ideas. "Learning Field" means once they decide to expose themselves to new ideas and new ways of doing things, they go at it with thoroughness and zeal. This could also be true for AAACE. This could help us do what Johnsonville Foods did when they decided to become a "Learning Organization." They changed

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the problems that may be encountered reinforces the credibility of the programming. By providing solutions for the problem you reinforce the perceived "do-ability" of the endeavor

3. Structure the program to mesh with other adult responsibilities. Scheduling classes to accommodate various work schedules, providing convenient program locations and clear administrative procedures, are all effective in securing and retaining the working adult student. Suggest ways to

maintain balance and harmony. Help students identify techniques to stress management and possible structures to support successful study.

4. Provide affirmation to the students as they complete sub-goals. Help them celebrate their achievements along the way

5. Assist in the development of a viable support system among the students. Possible examples of this would be to promote student communication by providing administrative assistance for the development of car pools, study groups, student directories, and

child care arrangements

Further Thoughts

Adult educators need to offer programs that address the needs and problems of this growing segment of the student body. Increasing access to educational opportunities by creative program development is part of the answer. In addition, adult educators can effectively help students stay motivated and overcome barriers by incorporating the strategies and tips of adult learners who have already succeeded. ▲

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their focus from using people to build a great business to using business to build great people. This is Adult Education!

Eighth, the "commitment" needs to become a passion with us, which will fire up AAACE to cross over the line to become a Learning Organization. A friend of mine is a consultant at a major corporation, which has its world headquarters in St. Louis — Monsanto, Inc. She participated in an Adult Education Facilitator Workshop I conducted. The top officers of Monsanto had her come in one day to help them develop the structure for some new things they are wanting to do as they move toward the future. They said to her, "Tell us what you are passionate about." She took some time and told them.

When she finished they said, "Now, we want you to make that happen with us in this venture. Whatever it costs — energy, time, money, etc., we want it and will do what it takes to accomplish it." They believed that passion and commitment go together

We may ask, Can AAACE cross over the line and become a Learning Organization? Can we make the "commitment?" I believe so. I am passionate about the idea of AAACE becoming a Learning Organization and I am passionate about learning. Will you join in the "commitment?" That ingredient will move us beyond the idea stage and fire up AAACE to cross over the line and become a "Learning Organization." ▲

— **by John A. Henschke**
President, AAACE

Up Front, continued from p. 10

its inherent challenges and opportunities for continued change and learning throughout our entire life span. Much like Thomas, she presents growth as an innate characteristic of individuals, and change as an inherent characteristic of life itself. She further suggests both growth and change are more evident than ever in lives currently being lived, lives that are longer than they ever have been before. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi (*From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, Warner Books, 1995, p. 7) also refers to this "extended longevity," suggesting elderhood as "a time of unparalleled inner growth."

In summary, the constantly changing and lengthening contexts of our lives now, more than

ever, dictate our need to become comfortable partners with change. As Gardner asserts, "The world is an incomparable classroom, and life is a memorable teacher for those who aren't afraid of her" (p. 12). Life, it seems, is teaching us to live with change, and if we wish to be successful students, perhaps the only answer is still, learning to "keep up." ▲

— **by Jean Fleming**
Guest Editor

Jean Fleming is an assistant professor of adult continuing education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. She comes to this position after twenty-one years as a teacher, trainer, administrator, and consultant in adult education in Colorado.